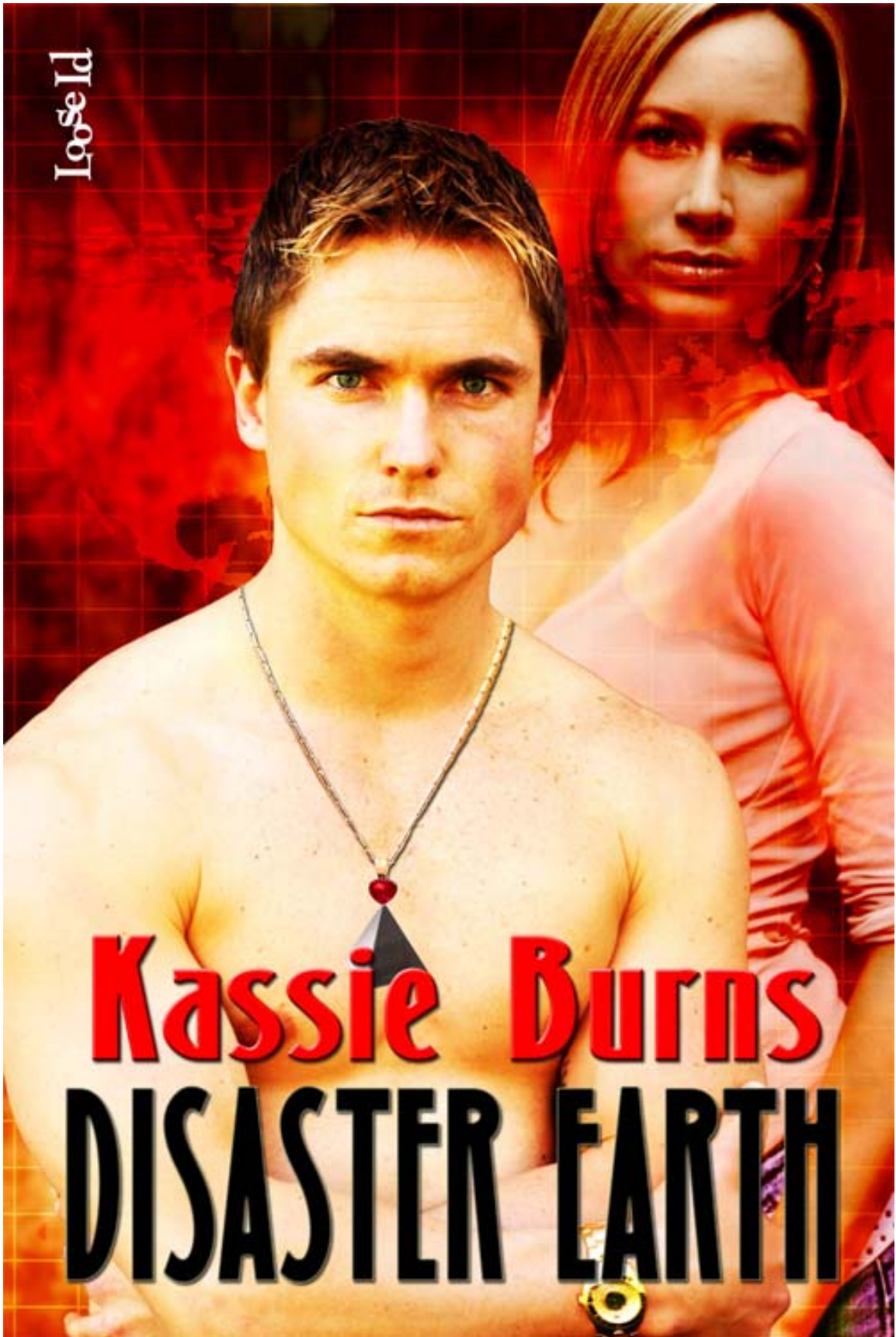


Loose Id



Kassie Burns
DISASTER EARTH

DISASTER EARTH

Kassie Burns

LooseId
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Disaster Earth

Kassie Burns

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © February 2006 by Kassie Burns

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-227-1

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Lorri-Lynne Brown
Cover Artist: Croco Designs

Dedication

To my big, bold Leo man.

Chapter One

Mercy Johnson opened the newspaper to the People section and checked her horoscope. *Today will present you with an unusual opportunity.*

She certainly hoped so. Given the current situation, she was ready to take just about any good news she could get. Sighing, she shifted position in her chair and reached for her morning cup of coffee. She enjoyed drinking that first cup outside on her apartment balcony. This particular morning was perfect for satisfying her caffeine addiction while gazing out at a gorgeous June day, with clear, robin's-egg-blue skies, lush green lawns, birds chirping, and flowers bursting into bloom.

What a waste. Mercy couldn't really appreciate the blossoming life all around her, not while an impending tragedy loomed over her head. She sighed again, folded the newspaper and dropped it on the table. Reading her horoscope had been an attempt at distraction, but nothing could take her mind off the terrible events of the past few days.

She glanced one last time at the headline: "Deadly Plague Sweeps through Northeast." The plague was spreading at a horrifying rate. The government had grounded all air travel and imposed a rigid quarantine to try to contain it. Gatherings of large groups of people were

now prohibited, and most businesses were closed. Even with these extreme measures, disease experts were predicting it would hit the Chicago area by week's end.

Mercy frowned, took another sip, and tried to wrap her mind around the fact that people were dropping dead on the East Coast. All still appeared calm in Chicago, although it was a surface calm only. A balmy breeze ruffled her hair, bringing with it the rich scent of newly cut grass. Looking out at the clipped lawn, she ran a hand through her tangled locks. She liked to keep her hair short in the summer. It kept the curls under control. She was overdue for a hair cut.

Too late. The shops are closed. This may be last beautiful sunny day I ever see. The thought filled her with foreboding. Life had turned uncertain. She'd better take her happiness wherever she could find it.

Especially when a plague is about to wipe out humanity. Mercy shivered at the gruesome possibility and pressed her fingers into her neck on either side of her chin, checking for the hundredth time that day to see if her lymph glands felt swollen. She'd woken up with a tickle in her throat and a sense of impending doom, but the tickle vanished when she drank a glass of water, and the bright summer sunshine made it hard to believe the human race had finally found a way to destroy itself.

Damn those terrorists to hell! Mercy chewed on her lower lip and pondered her chances of surviving the next few days. The media had christened the plague the black tongue. It had started in New York with an epidemic of mysterious cases in the city's hospitals. Then terrorists had written a boastful letter, claiming credit for releasing a bioengineered toxin on the subway. The terrifying new disease had quickly spread up and down the eastern seaboard. Unfortunately, tourists from other countries had been among those exposed in the subway. The incubation period of the virus was about three days, and they'd flown home before they knew they were infected. Now there were scattered cases overseas, too, with no known way to stop the spread. The cases might go from a handful to hundreds of thousands within days.

Of course, the president had declared an immediate quarantine and so far, no cases had been reported west of Philadelphia, but Mercy suspected the government was hiding the facts to prevent total panic. After all, airplanes flew from New York to every city in the United States. Meanwhile, the entire country was holding its breath, almost literally, since the virus was airborne. The death rate was ninety percent among those who came down with the disease, which attacked the whole body, destroying the immune system at the same time that it sent infection everywhere. Most victims ended up choking to death on their own swollen, blackened tongues.

“Yuck!” Mercy drummed her fingers on the armrest of her chair and pushed the remains of her low-carb breakfast bar to one side. She’d lost her appetite. As she sipped her coffee, she pondered what to do with this unexpected free day. Normally, she’d be at the office already, knee-deep in work. The Argonne National Accelerator Laboratory, where she worked as a research assistant for a group of physicists, had shut down until further notice, but it wasn’t like she could go to the mall or the movies instead. They were closed, too.

The notes of “Fun, Fun, Fun” by the Beach Boys rang out from the folding table beside her chair. Mercy snatched up her cell phone and flipped it open. “Hello.”

“Hi, Mercy.” A pleasant baritone rumbled in her ear. “It’s Noah McKnight.”

“Hi, Noah!” Mercy blinked in surprise. Noah was the new guy at the office, the one who had all the single women practically drooling. She hoped he hadn’t noticed the slight tremor of excitement in her voice. Just the sound of his voice sent electricity racing up and down her spine, sparking heat in other places.

As she conjured up his image in her mind, she forgot the terror of the plague. Last week, a time that now seemed an eon ago in another, better world, she’d gone out with co-workers for a drink after work. He’d joined their group, and she’d had a chance to talk to him for the first time. They’d hit it off at once. The night had flown by as they chatted and laughed together, although she’d tried her best to keep from swooning over him too obviously. He had a presence that made him the center of any gathering. At first she’d

thought it was purely physical, the natural charm of a tall, broad-shouldered man with a stunning smile, not to mention thick blond hair and dark, soulful eyes. Why the eyes alone ... obsidian eyes she'd thought the first time she'd gazed into their infinite black depths. They made her think of the mysterious monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with its compelling power to fascinate.

But the sense of presence he radiated was more than that, as she'd discovered while talking to him. He was fun and witty and intelligent with a rare sensitivity to her feelings that turned her insides to mush. They yakked until the bar closed, and they were kicked out on the street. She'd prayed every day since that he'd call her.

Now he had, but the world was ending. Damn!

"Are you surprised to hear from me?" he asked. "I had to make sure you're alive and well." The sincere concern in his voice warmed her heart. She pictured a friendly smile quirking up the corner of his sensual mouth. The tight knot in her stomach loosened as some of her fear drained away. The worst part of the past day or two had been facing this crisis alone. She had friends, sure, but she was an only child and her parents were both gone. She had no family to help her through this.

She clutched the phone tight. What if she pretended this plague nightmare wasn't happening? What if she concentrated on finding pleasure in whatever time they had left?

What if Noah wanted the same thing?

The idea left her breathless and giddy. How easy it would be to try to forget this nightmare in those strong arms, to feel those firm lips pressed against hers ...

"Mercy, are you there?"

With an effort, she let go of the erotic visions that had suddenly blossomed full-blown in her mind. "Yes, I'm here. I'm alive and well, but I'm slowly going crazy. I feel like I'm trapped in my apartment."

A bird sang a cheery song from the branch of the tall oak tree that shaded her balcony. Lucky bird. It didn't have to worry about coming down with black tongue.

"I'm glad to hear that." His words tumbled out with an engaging eagerness. "Well, not glad you're feeling trapped, but maybe if you're bored enough you'll be open to considering my request."

"Which is?"

"I'm new at the lab, as you know, and the thing is, I only moved to the Chicago area three weeks ago, so I don't know anyone here. I guess I'm feeling lonely. I'm freaking out sitting in front of the TV listening to reports of the mounting death toll. I was wondering if you would like to live dangerously and go out with me. We could spend the day together."

Oh, yeah. Yet despite her enthusiastic libido, Mercy couldn't ignore the stab of fear in her stomach. If she went out around the suburbs she would risk exposing herself to the deadly plague. Then she half-snorted into the phone. Who was she kidding? She was sitting outside drinking her coffee. It wasn't like she had air filters on the doors and windows of her apartment. If the plague reached the Chicago area, she was a goner anyway.

If ever there was a time to eat, drink, and be merry, it's now, her libido whispered in the back of her mind.

"What would you like to do?" Only essential services such as hospitals, gas stations, and grocery stores were still operating and then only with skeleton crews.

"I was thinking we should do our best to enjoy life while we can." The seductive rumble of his voice stirred a flame to life inside her.

Great! We think alike. She drew in a shaky breath, vivid erotic images once more leaping to life in her mind's eye. She wondered where he was. In his apartment? Standing looking out the window as he talked, in blue jeans and a t-shirt, his hair tousled from sleep, his feet bare?

Her heart pounded as another image sprang into her mind. Maybe he was still in bed, his naked body wrapped in a white sheet. Even this early in the summer, he sported a tan. She'd noticed the other night how well it set off his wheat-gold hair. Now she couldn't help but wonder if that tan covered his whole body.

"You might think this strange," Noah continued. "But I've been raised to follow my intuition. Ever since meeting you, my gut's been telling me to stick close. I want to get to know you better, and it occurred to me today would be the perfect opportunity for the two of us to get together and become intimately acquainted."

Mercy's toes curled at his words. An intimate relationship. That was exactly what she wanted. She gripped the phone tighter and lifted an eyebrow. "Strange? I think it's a wonderful idea. What do you have in mind?"

"I'm looking at this gorgeous sunshine and picturing being with you. I can see you sitting under a tree, enjoying a picnic with me." His low, intimate voice simmered with erotic promise. His words caressed her ear. "We'll find someplace private, by a river or a lake. We'll spread out a blanket and share some wine and bread and cheese. Maybe we'll get a little bit drunk. I need to be close to someone. I need to hold someone. I want it to be you."

Mercy's throat went dry. "Why, Noah! We've never even had an official date."

"I know. Believe me, I intended to change all that. I was going to ask you out to a movie next week, wine and dine you, and build a relationship. Somehow I sense it's important to have a relationship with you."

"Oh!" was all Mercy could squeak. Good God, she would have given anything to hear these words a week ago. But could they even have a future now?

"These goddamned terrorists have robbed us of the luxury of time," Noah went on. The man must be a mind reader. "I hate to sound morbid, or frighten you, but ..." He let the words trail off. There was no need to finish the sentence.

After a moment, he resumed talking. “Remember, in the bar the other night when I asked you if you were willing to live dangerously? I’m looking for a woman with certain characteristics. That includes having the courage to take a risk. Are you willing to take a chance on a relative stranger?”

“That’s me,” Mercy almost laughed. “People say I take too many chances, but if I see something that needs to be done, I go out and do it.”

“Yes, I saw that in you, and I like it. So what about today? I want to feed you cheese while I nibble your ear. I want to stare into your sea-green eyes and play with your tawny hair. I want to talk and laugh and get to know you. And later, if it seems right, I want to lie in the grass with you beneath a bright blue sky and make love until nothing else in all the wide world matters.”

Mercy was glad Noah couldn’t see her. She was sure her cheeks had turned flame-red. Her nipples hardened, and she grew damp between her legs as she contemplated the picture his words had evoked.

“Well? You haven’t said anything. Have I scared you off?”

She drew in a breath. “No. I feel the same way, like time is running out, and I’d better seize the chance to live while I still can.”

There, she’d said it. She swallowed hard. *One last chance for what? Time for lust at least.* And maybe, if she was very lucky, there’d be time for a little bit of love.

“I knew you’d be open to the idea. There’s something about you: a sparkle in your eyes, a lilt in your laugh, a joy of life. I knew you weren’t going to just sit around and wait for death to come calling.”

“No more mention of death!” she snapped, suddenly determined to enjoy this experience to the hilt. “As it happens, I have some cheese and a loaf of French bread.”

Noah chuckled. “Now we’re talking. I have a bottle of vintage wine and a blanket. I think we’re in business. I’m guessing that with most people cowering indoors away from

everyone else, the Fox River Forest Preserve might be deserted. We'll find a nice meadow along the river, surrounded by trees. What do you say?"

Mercy noticed that her hand holding the phone was shaking. Her whole body felt weak. At this rate, she'd probably topple onto the blanket and spread her legs the first time he cracked a smile. What did it matter? It was what they both wanted.

"I can be there in an hour."

"Wonderful." She heard the relief in his voice. "I'll meet you in the parking lot."

Chapter Two

The deserted suburban streets, normally a crawling mass of bumper-to-bumper metal, gave Mercy the creeps as she drove north to the forest preserve. It was like driving through a ghost town. Gone were the lane-hogging Hummers, the ubiquitous family vans, and the teeny bopper junk cars with their blaring stereos. There were only a few cars on the road, most of them heading west, away from the metropolitan area.

People were a rare sight, too. She spotted one man hurrying along a sidewalk with his head down. He was wearing a white mask over his mouth and nose. A small dog strained at the end of the leash he held.

A red Mustang convertible sat parked at the far end of the expanse of concrete as she pulled into the lot at the forest preserve. It was the only car there. She grinned as Noah gave his horn a friendly toot in welcome. She wouldn't have guessed him for a Mustang guy when she first saw him in his severe white lab coat. But during their talk in the bar she'd discovered his fun-loving side. The convertible confirmed it. Her hopes rose that this afternoon would prove more than satisfying.

As she drove closer, the Mustang's door swung open and Noah stepped out. Without thinking, Mercy stomped on the brake. As her car screeched to a halt, she devoted her full

attention to scanning him from head to toe. What a piece of eye candy he was. He had a sculpted physique and broad shoulders that strained at the fabric of his designer t-shirt. Definitely worth the risk, although he looked the picture of health, with his tanned, glowing skin. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his crisp white shorts and moved to her side as she stepped out of her car, which had come to a stop at a crazy angle about ten feet from his.

Her gaze dropped to the crotch of those shorts. An undeniable fullness in the inverted V above his muscular thighs made her throat go dry and kindled her imagination.

She looked up into laughing eyes as black as obsidian. “I thought we were going to have a picnic on the grass.” She decided to be bold, even a little brazen. “You know, get down, roll around, and make love. If we do, you’re going to ruin those white shorts.”

Noah’s mouth twitched with amusement. He held up both hands. “No worries about that. Who says I’ll be wearing these shorts when I get down on the grass?”

Mercy half-choked, slightly nonplussed. This was going faster than she’d imagined. Sure the plague was on its way, and they had to hurry with the eating and drinking part so they could get to the making merry, but she’d at least like to do more than say hello first. “Well, yeah, I guess I asked for that. But a girl likes a little foreplay.”

Noah’s smile broadened. “Don’t worry, foreplay is my favorite part. I believe I promised to wine and dine and seduce you, and I intend to deliver. I’ve got a blanket in my backpack and some throw pillows and a bottle of wine. I’m quite prepared to woo you with flowery phrases and badly recited poetry.”

“You can recite poetry?”

“Yeah. I know we research scientists have a bad reputation when it comes to hearts and flowers and romance and all that stuff, but in fact, I have a well-worn volume of poetry on the nightstand beside my bed. I’ll be glad to prove it to you by reciting the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám from memory.”

Mercy glanced up at the sun blazing in the clear blue sky and smiled. “That’s the perfect poem for today. ‘A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou ...’” She sighed. “Poetry makes me melt.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Noah gave her a friendly leer. “But right now this sun is what’s making me melt.” He swiped an elbow across his brow. “I’m thinking we might want to find a shade tree in that meadow. Or do you like it hot and sweaty?”

Mercy blinked at the bluntness of the question. Damn it, the sun was hot, or was she blushing? When Noah had started at the lab two weeks ago, she’d pegged him as the quiet, reserved type. He had a way of standing back and observing everything around him that made her think of some anthropologist taking notes on the natives. But he certainly seemed in the mood for active participation today.

The threat of imminent death certainly changed a person.

She pushed the thought of their clouded future out of her mind. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and a handsome man was about to make glorious love to her beneath a bright blue sky, or maybe beneath the old oak tree. Whatever. She was ready. The dark eyes of the man in front of her sparkled with confidence, a sparkle that held the promise of a magnificent day together.

While Noah retrieved his backpack from the Mustang, Mercy bent down and retied the laces on her tattered tennis shoes. She needed a few moments to get her pounding pulse under control. As she straightened up, she noticed how askew her car was. Just because the world was ending, it was no reason to get sloppy. Getting in, she maneuvered it into a parking space under the shade of a tree. After setting the parking brake, she reached into the back seat and retrieved the picnic basket she’d packed with a plate of various cheeses and a loaf of French bread.

“Let me carry that.” Noah took it from her, his hand brushing against hers as he grabbed the handle. The heat from his fingers sent tingles racing down her nerve endings.

“I have the wine in here.” He shouldered his pack. “Just plastic glasses, though.”

“Plastic will be fine.” Mercy glanced around, surprised at the utter quiet except for the twitter of birds. Apparently, there was no one else in the park. She crossed her fingers and murmured a prayer that the glade would be empty when they got to it. “It’s been a long time since I went on a picnic.”

“I hope we both enjoy it.” Noah’s smile held a seductive promise. Together they started down the path that led from the parking lot into the woods. The narrow track forced them to walk single file. Although Mercy regretted losing the chance to hold Noah’s hand, as compensation she got to admire the strong set of his shoulders as he strode ahead of her.

Thick tree branches formed a green archway above their heads. Mercy knew from past visits to the forest preserve that this path led to an open meadow beside the river.

Noah ducked to avoid a low-hanging branch and then stopped to hold it out of the way for her. Mercy gave him a sideways look as she passed under the leaves. “Do you like the outdoors, Noah?”

“I like nature.” He regarded her with a serious expression. “Nature is a mighty force, and one that humanity doesn’t understand. If they did, they would treat the spirit of the Earth with a lot more respect.”

“Humanity?” Mercy lifted her eyebrows. “That would include you and me.”

He laughed. “Of course. There’s no reason to be ashamed of being human.”

Mercy shot him a puzzled look. What a strange thing to say.

He waved a hand. “But we need to do better. Time is running out.”

Time was running out. That much was undeniably true. They might both be dead by the end of the week. A sense of unreality gripped her. She’d always held something back in every relationship, waiting for the perfect one. But there was no more time to wait. It was time to explore a relationship to the depths and see where that experience took her.

“I shouldn’t admit this, but what the hell, the world’s ending.” Mercy gave him a slow smile. “The truth is I’m looking forward to you seducing me. I’ve always kind of fantasized about making love outdoors.”

A stray ray of sunlight lit the angular planes of his face. His lips twitched. “Really? I thought there was something very down-to-earth and natural about you.” Releasing the branch, he resumed leading the way deeper into the forest.

Mercy noticed that he’d quickened the pace, and she was unaccountably pleased. She couldn’t really explain her own urgency, not even to herself. She’d often imagined the forbidden thrill of having sex out in the open where others might see her. Her heart had raced at the thought of lying spread-eagled on the ground, her naked skin exposed to the sun and the wind, but she’d always thought there would be all the time in the world to experience that illicit arousal ... except that now tomorrow was no longer certain.

Ahead of her, Noah turned to dazzle her with another megawatt smile. “You know you amaze me, don’t you? I’ve heard a lot about the charity work you do from some co-workers. You’re always helping someone.”

Mercy felt a twinge of embarrassment. What she did as a volunteer worker in the food bank was so little compared to the great need. How many times had she told herself that she couldn’t save everyone? “I’m no one special,” she protested.

“I disagree. Did I mention I’m somewhat intuitive? When I look at you, you glow with radiant blues and lavenders. Those are the colors of compassion.”

“Oh, yeah?” An intuitive who could see her glow. What a line. Mercy fought back a smile. He was laying it on pretty thick, but then she had no objections to a little flattery. “My friends say I’m too much of a sucker for someone in need.”

“A sweet sucker.” Noah joined her in a groan at the awfulness of his joke and stepped over a twisted tree root.

Her attention caught by the light shining in his eyes, Mercy almost tripped on the same root. As she stumbled, Noah grabbed her arm. He had long, strong fingers and a firm grip. The heat of his hand burned against her flesh.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine. I just need to watch where I’m going.” His eyes reminded her of deep, shadowed pools in the forest. She struggled to catch her breath and put a hand on his arm. His biceps were rock hard. “Thanks.”

He reached out and pushed a damp curl off her forehead in a curiously tender gesture. “No problem. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“What can happen?” She regretted her words the moment they came out. They were here to forget about what might happen. She forced a laugh. “Hey, when I got up this morning I thought this was a perfect day, a day made for something special.”

Noah took a step back and chuckled. “Jeez, now you’re putting some pressure on me. But I can handle it.”

“I know you can.” Mercy wished he’d take her hand, but the trail was too narrow for the two of them to walk side by side. Instead, he turned back to the path. Around them, the woods had fallen silent. Maybe she was missing the distant roar of traffic that normally permeated the air everywhere in the greater Chicagoland area. This was more than that though, a tingling stillness as if the world held its collective breath.

She shook off her uneasy feeling. Anxiety about the plague was making her jumpy. Besides, she wanted to concentrate on the vision in front of her. Noah’s broad shoulders, straight back, and tight butt tantalized her as he strode down the trail ahead of her. The man was in shape. He must visit the gym every day. What a cute ass he had! She couldn’t wait to get her hands on it.

The trees stopped where the trail climbed a small rise. Mercy stopped and looked downhill at a clearing that ran to the edge of the Fox River. The grass grew green and lush here and sunlight sparkled off the swiftly flowing water.

“Perfect.” Noah sauntered out into the grass, swinging his backpack down from his shoulders as he walked. He stopped near the water’s edge, beneath a tall maple tree, and placed her picnic basket and his pack on the ground. Bending over, he pulled out a green cotton blanket and two small throw pillows. “Will this spot do for my lady’s pleasure?”

With a grin, he trampled a section of grass, and then spread the blanket over it. He tossed the two pillows down next to each other and produced a bottle of red wine from the seemingly bottomless backpack. “Have a seat,” he invited with a sweeping gesture.

Mercy settled down on the nearest pillow. She uncovered the basket she’d packed and pulled out the plate of cheese and the loaf of bread, which she’d sliced earlier. Noah sat beside her and handed her a plastic glass. Rays of sunlight filtered through the green leaves to dapple his wheat-gold hair. He poured wine into her upheld glass and leaned back on one elbow on the second pillow.

He touched his glass to hers. “Here’s to the end of the world as we know it! Cheers!”

It seemed like a strange toast, but Mercy took a sip of the wine anyway. The crimson liquid had a delicate, fruity taste and spread pleasant warmth through her insides.

Noah slid closer on the blanket. He plucked a slice of cheese from the platter and held it up to her lips. “You look hungry. Have something to eat.”

She was hungry, all right, but not for bread and cheese. She leaned toward him and delicately nibbled at the cheese he held in his fingers. As her lips brushed his fingertips, he slipped the rest of the morsel into her mouth. His finger touched her teeth and she bit down gently, teasing him. Her tongue licked his skin, tasting salt.

“Oooh! Ouch!” He smiled at her. Passion blazed to life in the dark depths of his eyes.

“Did I hurt you?” She took his hand and kissed the fingers, all the while gazing deep into his eyes. Taking one finger into her mouth again, she sucked it, licking up and down its length. Her pussy tightened with desire. Forget the cheese and wine, this man was delicious.

His breathing grew hoarse as he watched her. He cupped the back of her head with his free hand and pulled her closer. She released his fingers as his lips found hers, his tongue penetrating her mouth to stroke her tongue. With a small moan, she let her body melt against his. His lips caressed hers, tender yet insistent.

When the kiss ended, they were both breathing hard. Mercy twisted away to reach for her wine glass and take another sip. She needed a moment to catch her breath. The wine burned her throat but that was nothing compared to the burning in her center.

She turned back in time to see Noah toss down his whole glass. He threw the plastic cup aside and leaned toward her, his fingers reaching out to catch a curl of her hair and twist it. He stroked the curl, then tucked it behind her ear in an intimate gesture. “Want more?” His breath tickled her ear as he edged closer and slipped an arm around her shoulders.

“More wine or more of you?” She tried to keep her voice casual although her heart pounded an unsteady beat in her chest. She leaned against his arm, surprised by his strength. As he drew her closer, the horrible terror of the past few days drained away and a warm glow replaced the fear. “I’m so glad you called. I was going stir crazy sitting home watching the death toll mount on TV.”

“Yeah, there’s something about knowing that the Grim Reaper is headed my way that makes me, well, long to get to know you in a more intimate way.” As he spoke, he lowered his head toward her again. The musky scent of his cologne enveloped her. She tilted her face upward to welcome his kiss.

His lips explored hers with a hungry boldness that promised erotic delights to come. He tasted of the wine he’d just swallowed and of the salt from his sweat. It was a manly, tantalizing taste. His tongue traced the outline of her lips and then pushed into her mouth,

opening her up to him with teasing thrusts that sparked a fire in her intimate places. She leaned into the kiss, closing her eyes to shut out the bright light. The dappled sunlight burned on her eyelids, its heat matching the mounting arousal of her body. She moaned with pleasure as his mouth crushed hers. A shiver of anticipation raced down her spine. He was going to be a wonderful lover.

Grinning, he broke off the kiss and reached for the top button of the sleeveless blouse of white cotton eyelet lace that she wore.

“Let me.” She pulled the blouse over her head in one quick motion while he stripped off his t-shirt. She shook her hair out of her eyes and stared at him in open admiration. A silver pendant hung around his neck, the shining metal setting off the deeper bronze of his skin and the toned muscles of his chest. This guy hadn’t just visited the gym -- he must have worn out the equipment. How could a simple lab coat hide so much tantalizing masculinity? Her throat tightened as she imagined her breasts pressed against those sculpted muscles.

Suddenly, her clothes were only in the way. Her wild fantasy about earthy, primal sex paled beside the reality of Noah’s sensual caresses. She wanted to make love with him. She wanted this man inside her, holding her, driving everything but lust from her mind.

Her fingers fumbling in haste, she undid the catch of her bra and tossed it to one side, then wiggled out of her jeans and underpants. Naked now, she lay down and stretched, exposing her entire body to his eager gaze.

“I like your enthusiasm.” Noah’s dark eyes narrowed as he devoured the sight of her exposed breasts. Wishing she’d gone to a tanning salon before the summer started, she glanced downward. Her breasts looked like bleached white marble in the noonday sun, the nipples a deep red in contrast. They hardened under his bold stare and she felt a hot, sexual flush spread across her skin. Her pussy dampened with moisture.

Without another word, he jumped to his feet and dropped his white shorts. Her breath caught at the sight of the bikini briefs he wore, bulging with his erection. He slid the last

garment off and his penis swung free. Looking up at it, she licked her lips in anticipation. It was like staring up at one of those gorgeous Greek statues of a naked man, only instead of cold white marble she saw warm, bronzed skin awaiting her caress.

“I guess you can see I’m ready.” Noah dropped back down onto the blanket and stretched out beside her. A flash of light from the silver pendant dangling around his neck caught her eye and she noticed that it had an engraving on the front. It looked like a pyramid with a ruby set at the peak. How strange.

She touched it with a tentative fingertip. “What’s this?”

He caught her hand in his, moving it away. “It’s a memento of home. I hope this doesn’t seem too fast to you, but I’ve been dreaming of this moment every night since the day we met.”

Her taut muscles relaxed as his words flowed over her like a caressing wave. The horrible reality of the plague seemed like a nightmare now, melting away in the rising flame of her passion. Alone in her apartment she’d felt vulnerable and exposed. But here with him, she felt a sense of protection.

Mercy shook her head and tried to fight off the feeling. It would be a mistake to imagine Noah as a knight in shining armor just because danger now filled her world. She’d always managed to take care of herself. Yet she couldn’t deny the fierce attraction roaring through her as he leaned closer. She sighed and stared into his eyes, wanting to drown in those dark pools, in the desire simmering in her blood.

Noah rolled into position above her, the width of his shoulders blotting out half the sky. He kissed her mouth, then trailed kisses down her neck to the soft mounds of her breasts. Mercy arched her back, feeling the hard earth beneath her digging into her shoulder blades. Noah’s mouth settled over one stiff nipple, his tongue flicking at the tender flesh, sending pulses of pleasure shooting down her nerve endings. Lord, if only he could do this forever, and this day would never end!

“That’s so good,” Mercy murmured, burying her hands in his thick, sun-streaked hair. Moisture gathered in the throbbing space between her thighs, and she knew she was ready for penetration. She spread her legs on the rough blanket, shivering with excitement as a warm breeze blew over her naked skin. Never before had she felt so exposed, so open to the sunlight and the wind. She found the sensation tremendously arousing.

“Mercy!” Noah’s voice held a kind of awe. “You’re beautiful.” His mouth blazed a hot, moist trail to her other nipple, sucking it to a matching peak.

Mercy ran one hand over the taut muscles of his shoulder and down his side, then across his flat abdomen. The man was a magnificent male machine. She hoped he was about to put those muscles to good use thrusting into her.

Her exploring hand groped between his legs and found the rigid length of his cock. Its silken heat throbbed in her grip as it jutted out, ready for action. She gave it an encouraging, provocative caress. Her excitement mounted to a fever pitch. “I’m ready, Noah.”

He lifted his head from her breasts and gazed at her, his dark eyes lit with a growing passion. “I’m ready, too. I want this to be special.”

“It already is.” She ran her free hand down the smooth skin of his back, feeling the muscles tense and poised for action. An intense, terrible need filled her as if she’d been waiting for this moment all her life.

Smiling, he lowered his head again and planted a warm, tender kiss on her lips. He pressed closer, the tip of his cock probing for her moist entrance.

A shudder of anticipation rippled through her. She spread her legs wider, her body aching for his penetrating thrust.

“Oh, God! Hurry!” A sheen of sweat dampened her skin. The world seemed to shake in sympathy with her longing.

“What the --!”

Noah's cry of surprise rang in her ears. The ground rolled beneath her, a frightening, disorienting movement as if the earth had suddenly become a ship tossed on a stormy sea.

"Whoa!" Above her, Noah froze. "What the hell!"

Mounting terror twisted through Mercy's gut. She wasn't moving. The earth was heaving beneath her, buckling up and down. The air filled with a terrible rumbling sound.

"No!" she screamed, pounding her fists on the rolling ground, her mind blank with terror. At the same instant Noah withdrew. He collapsed to one side of her as she rolled away. The earth shook and roared.

For a terrible, endless minute, it seemed as if the shaking would go on forever. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the roaring stopped and the ground stilled. Mercy lay on the blanket, panting in fear, all passion gone. "W-What was that?"

"An earthquake, I think." Noah looked at her with stunned eyes.

"An earthquake in Illinois? We don't have earthquakes here."

Noah got to his feet and picked up his bikini briefs. "Well, we just did. Forget the plague! I wonder how much of the city is left."

Chapter Three

That earthquake came too soon! Noah shook his head in chagrin as he zipped up his shorts. Too soon literally. He'd been one incredible second away from plunging deep inside Mercy. More disturbingly, it had come sooner than predicted according to the telepathic communications gleaned by the Shaloti before he accepted this assignment. Unless his people could prevent the tragedy, a series of major disasters would eventually destroy all human life on this planet, but they shouldn't be starting for another week yet. He needed that precious time to confirm his hunch that he'd found the right human subject. Selecting an optimal human lay at the heart of his mission.

Well, apparently the Shaloti were wrong. Things were going down faster than expected. That's what happened when you were dealing with a consciousness as vast and profound as Mother Earth, or Mom E, as he fondly thought of her. According to telepathic reports, the grand old lady had been getting pissed with her human children for a while, but this episode when they'd released a plague had clearly enraged her.

Damn! That made his mission even more urgent. He had to trust his inner voice, though. He had the benefit of a lifetime of training in sensing the universal flow. His

intuition told him Mercy was a key to the problem. He'd made contact and now he had to stay with her and develop their blossoming relationship. His mission depended on it.

He glanced over at her, admiring the provocative jiggle of her round, rose-tipped breasts as she hiked her tight jeans over her hips. If he and his people couldn't find a way to appease Mom E, the human species would disappear off this planet before the month was over. He couldn't imagine a more profound tragedy. Humans had made a mess of their planet, but they were capable of so much more.

Mercy bent over to reach for her bra, her breasts swinging free in a glorious arc, and his cock twitched in agreement. Yes, humanity had real potential, especially a gorgeous specimen like Mercy Johnson.

Still, he could understand why Mom E had had enough. A planetary consciousness like Mom E expected the intelligences she nurtured to evolve into worthy children. After thousands of years of human civilization, humanity had compiled a long list of disasters and atrocities. No doubt, some of these people deserved the fate that was about to hit them hard. Hell, they'd triggered the coming disasters with their blatant disregard of their ecosystem. Mom E was fighting back by trying to rid herself of the little buggers. The planet had decided to wipe the slate and start fresh with a new species as she'd done once before with the dinosaurs.

He couldn't let it happen. Wasn't his whole life about second chances? Now that he'd found Mercy, he had even more reason to fight for the survival of these humans. True, they were a narrow-minded bunch who barely suspected that they weren't alone in the universe. Even if Mom E had stayed the sweet mother to humankind, they still might have managed to blow themselves up or wipe themselves out with a plague like the one now ravaging the East Coast.

He sighed. Talk about your titanic rescue jobs.

Mercy donned her bra, her lush breasts swaying as she moved, and all thoughts of humanity's fate vanished from Noah's mind. Was that earthquake crummy timing, or what? His balls throbbed as he imagined the moist heat of her surrounding him. He wondered if she ached with the same frustration. No, she just looked scared, although she was trying to hide it. She pulled her blouse over her head and tossed her mop of tawny hair. Her chin lifted as eyes the vivid green of a sunlit leaf focused on him.

"This is like a bad dream. First a plague, and then an earthquake. I feel like I'm the pharaoh in Egypt and Moses and God are ganging up on me."

He smiled at that. The human race might be flawed, but he had to admire their sometimes quirky sense of humor. "I'm sure it's purely a natural phenomenon. I remember reading there's a major fault line that runs through the Midwest although most people don't know about it."

"Oh, you mean the New Madrid fault line." She brushed a lock of hair away from her eyes. Sunlight glinted on the golden highlights in the thick bronze mass. "It runs the length of the Mississippi and the last time it let loose in 1811 bells rang in Boston. It's supposed to have been a seven point two. Do you think that was a seven point two we just had?"

Noah gaped at her in astonishment. Beautiful and intelligent. "You amaze me. I don't know what a seven point two would feel like. I just know this quake felt plenty scary, and I'm afraid there may be a lot of damage."

She'd smiled at his amazement, displaying charming dimples, but her face sobered at his estimate of the severity of the quake. "I'm afraid you're right." Her chin lifted a notch higher and a look of determination gleamed in her eyes. "We'll have to do what we can to help."

"Probably the best thing we can do is stay out of the way of the trained professionals." As he spoke, the ground jerked and heaved upward. He swayed and nearly lost his balance. Regaining his footing, he grabbed for Mercy who'd let out a scream as she stumbled forward.

He caught her arm and pulled her into his embrace. Her skin felt like warm silk beneath his hand. Her wide eyes stared up at him in fear.

“An aftershock. It’s over now.”

She shuddered. “Let’s get out of here. See what’s going on.”

Reluctantly, he released her. They gathered up the blanket and pillows and wine and food, and headed back up the trail. Midway back to the lot, they had to climb over a tree that had fallen across the path. Gaping holes around them in the forest marked where the quake had toppled other trees.

When they emerged from the trail back onto the parking lot, Mercy gave a startled gasp. Noah followed the direction of her gaze and saw that a huge oak had toppled over and crushed her car. His Mustang a few feet away was untouched.

“Oh, no.” Mercy pressed her hand to her mouth in dismay as she approached her vehicle. “There’s no way I can even get into it to try and start it.”

“Don’t worry.” He came up beside her and laid a hand on her shoulder. “I can take you back to your apartment.”

“Thanks!”

The knuckles of her hand clutching the picnic basket had turned white. He gently pried her fingers loose and took it from her, then placed the basket and his backpack in the trunk of the Mustang. When he returned to her side, she still stood staring at her car. He threw an arm around her shoulder and squeezed. “It’ll be okay.” It surprised him how sensitive he felt to her pain. “You’ve got insurance, right?”

“Y-yes. It’s just a little scary being without a car right now, with everything that’s going on.”

He gave her shoulder another squeeze, turning her into his embrace. He placed his fingers under her chin and lifted it, all the while offering her his best devil-may-care smile. “Have no fear, my lady. Yon red chariot awaits thy command.”

To his surprise she pulled away. “Thanks. I’d appreciate a ride home, but I don’t need rescuing.” She glanced at the wreck of her car with a new determination. “I can take care of myself.”

He found the renewed glint in her eyes oddly attractive. “I’m sure you can. Heck, I just think this is a bad time to be alone.”

The look she gave him was devoid of her previous passion. It was cool and measuring, the look of a woman who knew she might face a dark future and wanted someone she could trust at her side. “I appreciate that, Noah, but we barely know each other. Although --” A blush began to steal up her cheeks. “-- I realize we were getting acquainted pretty fast.”

Watching the crimson flush stain her delicate complexion, Noah’s earlier passion reawakened. Sure, he had a mission, and she was a vital part of it. At the same time, a growing need to find acceptance in her eyes grew inside him. He wanted to be a man worthy of her trust, a man she would keep by her side. “More than acquainted, I’d say. Listen, give me a chance. I can grow on you. I can read and write, I’m housebroken, and I like small animals. What more could you ask for?”

A smile flickered across her lips. “I like you, too.”

“Great. We’re on a roll. Let me take you home. Once we get there, we can sit down and make a plan.”

“If I have a home.” Her eyes darkened to emerald, and he knew she was thinking of the devastation the earthquake might have caused.

“No need to borrow trouble.” He took her by the arm and steered her toward the car. “Get in, and we’ll go see what’s up.”

Or more likely, what’s down, he thought as he drove out of the secluded forest preserve and back on to a main thoroughfare.

The area just outside the preserve appeared relatively undamaged at first. A residential section, it featured spacious homes set well back from the road. Noah noticed some toppled

trees, one or two of which had smashed down onto roofs, but otherwise everything looked normal.

When they reached the first intersection, the traffic signals weren't working. The earthquake must have disrupted the power. Fortunately, there wasn't much traffic. Ahead, the pavement had buckled up, and he maneuvered into the oncoming lanes to get around the obstacle.

"Wouldn't want to try that at rush hour!" he joked.

They pulled onto an expressway and Mercy pointed to a four-story building ahead. The upper two stories had collapsed into a pile of rubble. Already rescue vehicles surrounded the building, red lights flashing. "At least it looks like the emergency workers are on the job."

Noah nodded, his stomach twisting with foreboding. When things started to go wrong in a big city, the situation could rapidly get dangerous. He gazed over at Mercy's solemn face, already so dear to him, and fought to hide his mounting concern. "The government will probably send in the National Guard. Given the situation on the East Coast, they might even decide to declare martial law."

Mercy's eyes widened. "What will that mean?"

He licked his lips and chose his words with care. He didn't want to frighten her, but he had to make her aware of the danger. "I'm not sure, but I've been thinking about getting out of the city. We'd better do it while we still have a chance."

They passed more high-rise buildings, some still intact, others in rubble. Everywhere, the wail of sirens pierced the air. Ambulances and other emergency vehicles rushed by them as they drove.

Shock etched Mercy's face with pain. "Maybe it's a good thing most people were home. These buildings were probably empty."

They reached the suburb of Naperville, where Mercy lived, and Noah pulled off the expressway onto a peaceful, tree-lined street. He noticed with relief that the traffic lights

were still functioning. Maybe this area had suffered less destruction. He pulled up in front of her apartment building, glad to see it appeared undamaged except for an ominous-looking crack in the foundation.

He pointed. "Was that there before?"

Mercy frowned, her hand on the car's door handle. "I'm not sure. I don't remember ever seeing a crack. Think the building's safe?"

Noah stared at the structure. Common sense suggested that they should stay outside. But part of his mission protocol was to evaluate Mercy in her own environment. Besides, his training included listening to his inner awareness, and no warnings sounded in his mind. He grunted. "Looks okay. We'd better be cautious going in though. I'd suggest getting whatever you need and getting out as --"

A rumble from deep within the earth cut off his words. As it mounted to a scream of sound, the ground underneath the Mustang heaved. The force of the upward motion sent Mercy sliding out of her seat. Noah grabbed her, holding her close as the car rose upward, then crashed down again.

"Omigod!" Mercy breathed in his ear. He could feel her heart hammering as her body pressed against his. She'd flung her arms around his neck when the car started to heave. Her huge eyes stared into his. Her lips trembled and despite the danger of the moment he was intensely aware of her soft and kissable mouth close to his.

Silence returned as the earthquake subsided. Noah swallowed hard, his inner world still rocking as he drowned in sea-green depths. Gods, she was beautiful. Despite her courage, she needed protection. She had no idea what was coming for her planet in the next week.

Staring into her startled face, he cupped one hand behind her neck and pulled her closer. Dammit, chaos and death threatened this world. He had to keep her safe, had to keep her at his side.

Her mouth opened in welcome as his lips touched hers, and she moaned softly. Her muscles, tense with fear, relaxed a little as she yielded to his embrace. Her heart thudded a rapid beat against his chest as he pressed her close. He explored her hot mouth with eager lips, tasted the last traces of the wine they'd shared, along with her own taste, deep and musky and full of feminine enticement. He slid his tongue inside her in a slow, sensual thrust, a promise of his intentions. Several long, pleasurable seconds passed before he reluctantly broke the kiss.

"I don't know how much time we have." He nodded to the building. "We'd better get going."

"Okay." Her voice sounded breathless with desire. She leaned forward and placed a gentle second kiss on his lips.

The brief touch burned, making him want more. Her scent teased his nostrils, a compelling combination of roses and jasmine over a deeper, musky scent that was all her own. As she withdrew, he saw the outline of her stiffened nipples beneath her blouse. A sexual flush reddened her neck.

His cock hardened and yearning clogged his throat. How much longer would the apartment building be safe? Did they dare steal the time to tumble into her bed and finish their interrupted lovemaking?

She glanced his way and the smoldering fire in her eyes told him she was thinking the same thing. All thoughts of danger vanished from his mind as he jumped out to help her from the car.

Chapter Four

As Mercy's apartment door swung open, her jaw dropped. She stared, stunned by the devastation before her. Her usually neat apartment looked as if a tornado had ripped through it. Books had spilled from the bookshelves and lay strewn across the living room rug. To the right, in the long, narrow galley kitchen, broken glass and piles of cans and packages lay in heaps where they'd fallen out of the upper shelves. The chandelier dangled at an odd angle above the dining room table.

Reaching inside, she flicked on the light switch. A lamp on the far side of the living room lit up. She breathed a sigh of relief. "At least I have power."

Her heart sank again as she walked into the living area, picking her way over the books scattered across the carpet. It would take hours to clean up this mess.

She half turned in time to see Noah pause in the doorway. His broad shoulders almost filled the frame. A curious feeling of gratitude mingled with relief flashed through her as she watched him calmly assess the situation. Everything was going wrong, and yet somehow things had never been more right.

He stepped over the rubble to her side and took her hand in his, conveying comfort in a simple gesture. With a tip of his head, he indicated the TV. "Maybe we'd better see if that's working first, and find out what's going on."

The TV, encased behind doors in the entertainment center, appeared undamaged. She walked over to the couch, tossed a few books aside, and dug up the remote. Her finger pressed the button and the set sprang to life.

"Houston, we have ignition." She grinned at Noah and sank down on the couch, patting the cushion at her side.

He joined her, sliding in close beside her as if he'd sat next to her a hundred times. Despite the mess all around her, Mercy couldn't help smiling. It felt so good to have him with her. His thigh pressed against hers and he slipped an arm around her shoulders. She sank against the support of his strong shoulder with an inner sigh of pleasure. His touch reawakened the ache between her legs and her hand shook ever so slightly as she punched up the volume.

A network anchor appeared on the screen, her hair still perfectly coiffed, her makeup immaculate despite the disaster visible behind her. She stood on a street in the heart of Chicago with sirens screaming and emergency vehicles flashing by her in the background. Behind her, Mercy could see a towering, smoking pile of stone.

A caption at the bottom of the screen identified her as Susan Summers. "As you know," Susan said into the camera, "the buildings in Chicago were not built to withstand the force of an earthquake in the same way as buildings in California or Japan or other earthquake zones of the planet. The seven point five quake today --"

"Omigod! Seven point five, that's awful." Mercy gulped and then smiled in gratitude when Noah took her hand and squeezed it.

-- has caused extensive damage throughout the city and the suburbs. Fortunately, we've been spared even greater loss of life because so many of these skyscraper office

buildings were empty today due to the shutdown of business to prevent spread of the plague.”

“Thank God!” Mercy sighed and tried to concentrate. It was hard and getting harder. Noah pulled her tight against his chest and his arm wrapped around her. Not that she objected. She had no objections at all. Encircled by the strength of his arm, she felt safe for the first time that day. She leaned against his chest, surrounded by his warmth, and said a silent prayer that she’d have time to explore the tumultuous feelings he roused in her. Heat from his thigh burned against hers. His free hand stroked her hair as they both stared at the TV, and his breath stirred the fine hairs at her temple. He was a strong, comforting presence, like a blanket wrapped around her, an anchor of calm in the midst of this awful reality. At the same time, she felt an inner stirring as his touch sent waves of pleasure pulsing clear down to her feminine core. She grew achingly aware of the hard muscles of his shoulder, of the lean, taut length of his body pressed against her. The sensation excited her, reminding her of his undeniable masculinity.

She shook her head. This was no time for erotic fantasies. She had to face what was happening, had to decide how to deal with it.

Susan Summers gazed out at them, her expression grim. “Emergency workers here have set the death toll at three hundred and fifty so far, but it’s bound to rise. I’ve heard estimates of deaths throughout the greater Chicago area go as high as one thousand. The governor has asked the president to declare martial law and send in the National Guard to help cope with the emergency. The president is expected to grant that request, although many guard units are currently busy trying to maintain the quarantine around the plague area to the east.”

“Looks like we only have a little while before troops get here.” Noah’s hand tightened around hers. His fingertips caressed her palm, sending little jolts of electricity up her arm. “If we want to leave, we’ll have to do it right away.”

At that moment, Mercy wanted nothing more than to stay, to wrap her arms around his neck and drag him down on the couch to finish what they’d started earlier, but the

destruction throughout her apartment caught her eye. Another tremor might bring a collapse. Noah was right. She couldn't stay here. It would be silly not to trust him when she was more than willing to give him her body. But where would they go?

The screen divided into two pictures as a man appeared seated at a desk. The identification at the bottom of the picture read Hunter Brooks, network commentator. "The president is trying to maintain a sense of calm, Susan," he declared. "But troops are struggling to contain the situation on the East Coast where many citizens are trying to flee and escape what seems to be almost certain death. We're getting scattered reports that they've had to fire on some groups of people to stop them from breaking through the quarantine line."

"That's terrible, Hunter, and it can only mean a delay in getting much needed help here to Chicago." Susan looked concerned as she gazed into the camera. "Any progress in fighting the plague?"

"No." Hunter straightened his shoulders. "Both private and government researchers are working around the clock, but so far no treatment seems to have any effect on the overwhelming mortality rate of the so-called black tongue. And it has been confirmed that the contagious virus is airborne."

Susan pressed a hand to her earpiece as if she hoped she'd misheard. "Grim news, Hunter."

The camera focused in on Hunter's face. The words *Breaking News* appeared at the bottom of the screen. "And it only gets grimmer, folks. This just in from the National Earthquake Information Center in Denver, Colorado. It appears the massive earthquake along the New Madrid fault line in the Midwest has triggered activity in Yellowstone Park. As some of you may know, scientists in recent years have discovered, through photographs from space, that Yellowstone Park is actually the dormant crater of a super volcano. The crater was formed in the last explosion of the volcano six hundred and forty thousand years ago. This volcano is capable of a stupendous eruption, up to one hundred times larger than a normal volcanic eruption. Such an event could cause a global catastrophe."

He shuffled his papers and cleared his throat. “Scientists are closely monitoring the situation, especially signs of increasing pressure in the magma dome beneath the park. Visitors to the park are currently being evacuated and Yellowstone has been closed until further notice.”

Hunter looked up and to the right as the screen split again to show a man in a white coat. “We have with us now Dr. Richard Shark, a well-known expert on the Yellowstone super volcano. Dr. Shark, what are the chances we’re looking at an eruption in the near future?”

Dr. Shark glared impatiently at the camera. “I’d say the chances are good!” he snapped. “This volcano is overdue for an eruption anyway and the earthquake earlier seems to have triggered some sort of buildup in the magma chamber. We’ve recorded a one-foot rise in the elevation of the land at our monitoring stations today. I’d say all hell is about to break loose!”

Hunter turned pale and grabbed for another sheet of paper. “I understand that such an eruption might affect a wide area of the country.”

Dr. Shark laughed, a maniacal look in his eyes. “You could say so. The last time this happened, the United States, or what was one day to become the United States, was buried under several feet of ash, not to mention vast amounts of choking sulfurous gases.” His eyes shifted right and left as if searching for something. “I’d run, but there’s nowhere to hide!”

“Enough!” Mercy shuddered and switched off the TV. “That’s way more than I wanted to know.”

“He’s right.” Noah’s arm around her tightened, pressing her against his chest. “If that super volcano goes, it will be hard to find a place to hide. You don’t want to mess with Mother Earth when she blows her stack.”

“Mother Earth?” Mercy forced a laugh. “I thought she was on our side. You know, the mother bit.”

To her surprise, Noah shook his head. His voice grew grim with unexpected passion. “How could she be? She cares about the whole planet and right now, she’s getting royally pissed with humans because of the way humanity has ravaged the environment. Now this plague! It’s not bad enough you’re destroying the Earth in your arrogance, you’re out to destroy yourselves as well.”

“Hang on!” Mercy protested. She pulled free from his embrace and shot him a puzzled look. The anger in his voice surprised her. “You’re talking like you’re not one of us. I’ll bet you’ve guzzled plenty of gas driving that Mustang around. And added your fair share of plastic to the garbage every week.” She tried to keep her tone light, despite the slight flicker of unease she felt. Was he one of those environmental wackos, more concerned about saving fish than people?

She was even more surprised when he scowled at her. “The damage was done long before I got here.”

“To Chicago maybe.” She attempted a smile to take the sting out of her words. “That doesn’t mean you didn’t pollute somewhere else. Come on, admit it. We’re all in this together.”

His scowl only deepened. “That’s the trouble with your society. You’re always trying to put the blame on someone else while continuing your own selfish, polluting behavior. It’s no wonder the planet is ready to blow up.”

Mercy frowned. His attitude was starting to annoy her. “You sound like you think the planet is reacting to us.”

“Maybe I do. Ever heard of the concept of planetary consciousness? Some of your more visionary thinkers have grasped it.”

Planetary consciousness. Mercy gave him a sidelong look. Now he sounded like an environmental wacko *and* a new age nut. Just when she was starting to feel something for him, too. Maybe she should just ask him to go home. She opened her mouth to speak, then

hesitated. He was staring at her, his dark eyes concerned, and she suddenly understood that he was scowling because he was worried. With a secret thrill, she realized he was worried for her.

She took a deep breath. This crisis was making everyone stress out and overreact. “I’ve heard of the idea that the whole planet might be conscious,” she said mildly, “but it’s always seemed a bit farfetched to me. I thought you were a scientist.”

“I am, and that means I keep an open mind.” Noah pushed a lock of hair off his forehead in exasperation. “I know you’re a bright young woman. You’re far too bright to reject an idea simply because it’s unorthodox.” His scowl had faded as he spoke and now he smiled. The sight of that infectious grin made Mercy forget her sudden anxiety. He had a smile that lit up his whole face.

“I’m no nut,” he assured her, with a sparkle in his eye. “Several of the most groundbreaking thinkers of the twentieth century believed that the planet itself might be aware. I think humans have always known it in an intuitive way. Why else do you call her ‘Mother Earth’? I’ve gone one step further. I call her Mom E.”

“Mom E. Clever.” She gave him a grudging smile. It was impossible to argue when he looked at her that way. She could feel her bones melting under the warmth of that grin. “Okay, Mom E is mad. What can we do about it?”

His smile faded. “We have to convince her humanity is worth saving. Otherwise, she’ll continue to cause upheavals until the human race is destroyed.”

Mercy sucked in a nervous breath. “Boy, I hope you’re wrong about that!” She glanced around her apartment. “So what do you think? Where could we go that would be safe?”

Noah set his jaw. His dark eyes flashed with determination as he gazed at her. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

His words sent a wave of warmth through her. She laughed, trying to sound unconcerned. “Those scientists may be panicking over nothing. They have no way of knowing for certain if there will be an eruption or how strong it will be.”

“The signs don’t look good.”

Mercy laid her hand on his knee. Touching him steadied her nerves. He radiated a calm confidence. She wished he’d put his arm around her again. “Okay, so we’ll be prepared. You said something earlier about making a plan.”

“I did. I don’t think it’s smart to stay here in the city. There’s too much chaos right now. Chicago has too many people and not enough resources if civilization starts to break down. Anything could happen.”

Mercy had watched her fair share of disaster movies on late-night TV, and she knew exactly what he meant. The power could go out at any moment. People would raid the grocery stores, and then there’d be no food. If the plague reached Chicago, the hospitals, already strained by the earthquake, would be unable to cope. People would turn against each other in fear.

“What should we do?”

He smiled at her, a dimple forming in one cheek. Despite the danger they were in, butterflies fluttered in her stomach. Lord, her survival instincts must be kicking in big time. All she could think about was getting her hands on that strong body.

A matching intensity of emotion glowed in Noah’s gaze, but he stuck to the subject. “My father owns a vacation home on Lake Cumberland in Kentucky. If we left soon and drove all night, we could be there by tomorrow. He’s always been a bit paranoid so he keeps it stocked with survival food, and it has its own generator. It might be the perfect place to ride out this crisis.”

Relief flooded through her like a warm tide. Then she frowned as an objection occurred to her. “But what about your father and the rest of your family? Will they want me there?”

Noah bit down on his lip. “There’s only my mother and my father and unfortunately, they were in Europe when the plague started. All flights back to the U.S. were canceled as soon as the danger of contagion became evident. They can’t get back. I just keep praying that they’ll be safe there.”

She touched his cheek, her heart filling with compassion. “I’m sure they will be.”

“Thanks!” His dark eyes shone with gratitude. He leaned closer, brushed a gentle kiss across her lips. At that moment, the floor jolted as an aftershock let loose. Mercy tumbled into his arms.

She caught her breath and realized she was lying on top of him. The world stabilized once more. *I’d run, but there’s nowhere to hide.* The scientist’s words echoed through her mind. What if the super volcano erupted before they could reach Kentucky? What if the end of the world really was at hand? She and Noah had some unfinished business that she definitely wanted to finish first.

She propped herself on her elbows above him, then slid her hand over the hard muscles of his flat stomach until she reached the zipper to his shorts. Gazing down at his face, she lifted her eyebrows in an unspoken question.

Noah licked his lips and nodded slightly. She undid the button at the top of his shorts and pulled down on the zipper. The shorts fell open, exposing his briefs. His erection strained against the fabric.

“Ummm,” she murmured. She leaned down to kiss his mouth, a long, leisurely kiss. She didn’t care if the earth shook again, or the roof came tumbling down on top of them. She wanted this man, and wanted him now, with an urgent, primal need. Maybe it was the urge

to assure the survival of the race, but it was more than that, she knew. She wanted him, needed him, had to have him, before everything ended.

He gripped her shoulders, pulling her down to him, and returned her kiss, his lips crushing hers with bruising force. His hands slid down her back, over the curve of her waistline, to cup her buttocks. Heat kindled between her legs and then a flood of moisture filled her pussy as her body responded. She was slick and wet, ready for his penetration. It was time to claim a moment of love in the midst of this disaster.

Breathing harder, she broke free from his kiss and sat up. "Don't move," she ordered, getting to her feet. She turned to face the couch, reveling in his smoldering stare as he watched her unbutton and remove her blouse and bra, then slip out of her jeans and underpants. She stood for a moment, naked, her nipples tightening in the cool air, while his heated gaze swept up and down her body igniting sparks of anticipation wherever it touched. Stripping for him had aroused her to new heights of anticipation. No man had ever affected her this way before. Was it the end of the world that was making her so horny, or was Noah a truly remarkable male? She couldn't wait to find out.

She climbed back on the couch, straddling his hips with her thighs. Reaching out, she yanked down on his briefs. His cock sprang loose and thrust up into the air, straight and hard and proud.

"God, I'm aching to have you inside me." Leaning closer, she encircled the base with her hand and stroked up and down its unyielding length. When she cupped his balls and gently squeezed, his face grew taut with passion and need. She stroked upward again. When she reached the tip, a drop of his pre-come dampened her palm as she lightly teased him with her caressing fingers. His swift response to her touch excited her, filling her with a sense of power and delight.

He gasped and grabbed her waist and she knew he wanted to flip her over onto the couch and plunge into her. But she was enjoying the view from the top too much. "No." She

stopped him with a touch of her hand. "Let me impale myself on you. I want to feel you all the way up inside me."

He lay back, his cock stiff and ready. "Ride away."

Rising to her knees, Mercy positioned herself over him, her hand still on the head of his cock. Lowering her body, she guided him into the moisture-slick cleft between her legs. As the hard head parted her damp folds and penetrated her, a soft moan of pleasure escaped her lips.

Breathing harder, she lowered her weight, sinking him deep within her pulsing sheath. Her inner lips pressed against the base of his cock as he thrust upward, the tip of his penis striking the mouth of her womb. Noah filled her in a way no other man ever had. An intoxicating sense of discovery coursed through her.

She leaned forward, and her naked breasts swayed above his chest, the taut nipples brushing lightly against his curls of hair. She felt utterly exposed, utterly vulnerable. His cock filled all the empty space inside her, and each thrust he made upward rammed against her center with explosive force. She began to move, sliding up and down, coating his cock with the damp, slick moisture of her juices. Her mind whirled with the passion of their joining. This was what a sexual union was meant to be, this sensation of two beings melting into one.

Noah reached up and cupped her breasts, his agile fingers teasing the rigid, sensitive tips.

Waves of pleasure danced over her nerve endings like a cascading waterfall, an intense torrent of sensuality that spread down from her nipples to her cunt. The mounting pressure inside threatened to erupt like the super volcano in Yellowstone. *One hundred times the normal force*, she thought as her body exploded into convulsions that shook her from head to toe. The fireball erupting in her groin shot up her spine, and all conscious thought vanished as passion consumed her mind.

From a distance, she heard Noah cry out, and knew he was coming, too. Their bodies jerked and heaved on the couch, although the earth remained still.

Once the shudders began to subside, Mercy leaned forward and supported her upper body with her arms, panting for breath. She opened her eyes and stared down at Noah. He was still rigid inside her despite the explosive orgasm they'd just shared, and she wondered if she could find the strength to move again

A terrible, ear-splitting howl filled the air. Startled, she jerked upright. Her quick movement made Noah slip out of her. Some of his semen dribbled down her thigh, and she smelled his clean, hot scent. She jumped to her feet and ran naked to the window to look outside.

“What’s that?” Noah sat up with a look of alarm.

“The tornado sirens!”

Chapter Five

“We can’t possibly be having a tornado.” Noah stared at Mercy in complete disbelief. Things were happening with mind-bending speed. Sure, the Shaloti had told him Mom E was about to go on a rampage, but he still found himself shocked by her raw fury. Always before Mom E had unleashed enough disaster to shake some common sense into her stubborn human children, then backed off.

This time Mother Earth had truly had enough of humanity. The Shaloti had been right when they’d foreseen this coming danger. He took a deep breath. This was what he’d trained for. He’d come to Earth to help save these people. And he’d found Mercy. His intuition told him she had the potential to help stop this disaster before it escalated into ultimate doom. He had to believe that and develop the trust between them.

“You’re right. It can’t be a tornado.” Mercy turned back from the window. “There’s still not a cloud in the sky. Maybe they’re sounding the sirens as some kind of warning.”

Noah swung his legs to the floor and reached for the remote on the coffee table next to the couch. As the screen came on, Hunter Brooks reappeared. “I repeat,” the announcer said, staring out at them with frightened eyes, “the government has confirmed that the plague has broken out of the quarantine area. Isolated cases in Pittsburgh, Atlanta, and Las Vegas

confirm the spread of this disease. And this is just in.” He turned to face another camera. “A suspected case is reported in Chicago. Authorities are declaring martial law in those cities, although it may be several hours before the National Guard can arrive on the scene to enforce the edict.”

“That tears it.” Noah leapt to his feet and glanced around, searching for his discarded clothing. His observations of human reactions in the Chicago area would have to end. Mother E had reached full rampage mode. He needed to get back to base where he could contact the Shaloti for further guidance.

As he reached for his briefs, he saw Mercy still standing paralyzed near the window. Sunlight pouring through the glass backlit her slender form, and her naked skin glowed in the dazzling light. The glorious sight reminded him of the pure energy she possessed, the primal inner radiance that had first attracted his attention. She was definitely a prime candidate, someone who might make Mom E forget her mounting anger. Whatever happened, he had to rescue Mercy from this growing cataclysm. He crossed the room to her in two quick strides and laid a hand on her shoulder. “We’ve got to get out of this city before we’re trapped here.”

His touch broke through her momentary trance of fear. She straightened her shoulders and drew in a long breath. Courage flamed bright in her eyes. She turned toward the kitchen where packages and cans lay scattered amid broken glass. “There should be something to eat there, enough to get us to Kentucky anyway.”

Noah nodded, relieved to see the determined lift of her chin. He longed to hold her, to brush the tawny curls off her forehead and kiss her soft lips until she forgot everything but her growing desire for him. He needed to strengthen the bond between them, to assure that she would stay at his side, to cement what their sexual union had begun. But there was no time. Instead, he squeezed her shoulder, half-turning her toward another doorway. “I’ll go through the mess in the kitchen and pick some stuff out. You go into the bedroom and throw a few clothes in a suitcase. We need to hit the road before guards start setting up roadblocks.”

Mercy pointed at the far cupboard, beyond the stove. “I keep some old shopping bags in there. You can load the groceries in them.”

“Great. Now hurry.” He gave her rear a gentle slap, sending her toward her bedroom. Mercy gasped in surprise and then gave her rump a provocative wiggle. He licked his lips as he thought of the sensual depths yet unexplored between them. Each time they had sex it would bind her closer to him. Never had a duty seemed so pleasurable. Despite the urgency of the situation, he took a moment to appreciate the naked vision before him as she headed for her bedroom. His cock hardened again as his gaze moved from the sensuous curve of her waist to the tempting dimple in the small of her back just above her bare buttocks.

Pausing in the doorway to the other room, she turned back to him. “Do I have time for a shower?”

“Nope! And don’t worry, you smell great.” Erotic memories burned through his mind: the scent of her hair, the fragrance of her skin. He’d never known aroma could be so arousing, but everything about her enflamed his blood.

As he pulled on his clothes, he heard the sound of drawers opening and shutting in the bedroom. Good. She was packing, responding to his sense of urgency. He’d been afraid she would balk at going with him, but their intimacy had helped. He’d have to keep nurturing that trust on the difficult road ahead.

In the kitchen, he found two shopping bags folded in the pantry. Opening the cabinets, he discovered tuna fish in foil packs, a couple of cans of low-fat chicken breast, a jar of peanut butter, crackers and a loaf of multigrain bread. Plenty to get them to Kentucky. He’d kill for coffee, but there was no time to make any. At least she had pop. That would supply some caffeine. To reach the hideaway would require an all-night drive.

As he carried the bags into the living area, Mercy re-emerged from the bedroom, dragging her suitcase. She’d pulled on a clean pair of jeans, a sleeveless red blouse, and sturdy walking shoes.

“I’m ready,” she announced.

“That was fast. Let me visit the bathroom for a minute, and we’ll be on our way.”

While he washed his hands at the sink, he contemplated how much to tell her. At some point he’d have to start revealing the truth. He needed to prepare her. It would be too much of a shock otherwise, when they reached the base. Well, they’d have a long drive and plenty of time to talk, and she was intelligent enough to understand his revelations.

She’ll accept what I have to say, he told his reflection in the mirror. She’ll agree to be a part of it. She has to. I don’t want to lose her.

The realization surprised him. But he knew it was true. He’d expected to feel far too superior to the women of Earth to care about them in anything more than an abstract way. He’d known, of course, that he’d have to have sex with the one he chose. Sex lowered barriers and helped him to form a psychic link. He needed that link so he could show Mom E what Mercy’s essence was like.

It was a job; a noble job, a rescue mission, but a job nonetheless. He hadn’t expected it to be anything but a necessary task. Until he’d found Mercy. From the moment he’d first seen her, striding down a corridor at the lab, her very presence filling the drab gray space with light, he’d known she was the one he was searching for. She was his best chance to reach Mom E. More than that, she was a human he wanted to get to know in the most intimate way. Something about her had gotten under his skin.

Damn! This bonding works both ways.

He dried his hands. Out in the living room, he gathered up the sacks of groceries while she swept her gaze over her apartment. He watched in silence as she made her final farewell to the life she’d known. With a brave smile, she gripped the handle of her suitcase and stepped out into the hall. He slammed the door shut, not bothering to lock it.

Outside, the sun had fallen low in the sky, casting long, golden rays of late afternoon sunlight over the thick green grass. The bright pink and red flowers of the apartment’s well-

manicured lawn glowed against the emerald background. Noah threw her suitcase and the two bags of groceries in the Mustang's trunk, while Mercy climbed in the car. A second later, he got in the driver's seat, the engine roared to life, and he hit the gas, sending them down the street in a squeal of tires.

Chapter Six

The Mustang had just rounded the first corner when the tornado sirens finally stopped their prolonged howl. As the last echo died away, the silence seemed almost deafening.

“Why did they stop?” Mercy eyed Noah’s profile, noting the strong set of his jaw. This was a man who made a plan and carried through. She liked that. She was that way herself.

“Maybe the authorities think that everybody’s been sufficiently warned.” Noah leaned forward over the wheel, his eyes on the road, occasionally weaving across lanes to avoid gaping holes opened by the earthquakes. “I just want to get off the main highway before everyone else has the same idea we’ve had.”

“You think a lot of people will try and run?”

He shrugged. “Could be. Of course, most people have families to worry about. You know, the wife, the two kids, the in-laws, the dog. I’d think twice before heading out with my whole family with no safe destination in mind.” He glanced over at her. “What about you? I told you my parents are in Europe. Where’s your family?”

Mercy stared out the window at the buildings flashing by. No matter how many times she recounted her family history, it always hurt. “My mom’s dead. Cancer at the age of

thirty-five. I was fifteen when she died. My dad finished up raising me and my younger sister, or tried to. He wasn't very good at it."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Noah's voice was soft with sympathy.

Mercy bit her lip. Yeah. She was sorry, too. Sorry for the whole sordid mess. Sorry that her dad had failed her. She knew it made it hard for her to trust men sometimes.

She sighed, wondering if Noah would be any different. Grimacing, she pushed the thought aside. They were heading into an uncertain future together. This was no time for doubt.

"What did he do to you?" Noah turned his head and fixed her with a concerned look.

She swallowed and forced the painful words up out of her throat. "He liked to drink more than he liked to be with us. He was always fighting with my younger sister, Peggy. One night they had a terrible argument and she stormed out of the house and went to a party with some of the wilder kids at high school. I guess they got pretty drunk and high on drugs at the same time. She was on her way home when the driver swerved off the road and hit a tree. She was killed instantly, they say. My dad drank even more after that. He died two years ago of acute chronic alcoholism."

She sucked in a shaky breath and twisted in her seat to search the face of the man on the other side of the car. She didn't want pity. She hated the looks people sometimes gave her when they heard the story. To her relief, Noah's expression held only sympathetic interest.

"That's really tragic," he said at last, in a matter-of-fact tone that lifted a heavy weight off her heart, a weight she hadn't known was there. "But I can see you've had the courage to move beyond all that. You should be proud of yourself."

"Momma used to say, 'You're either part of the problem or part of the solution.' I try to be part of the solution." Mercy squared her shoulders. "That's why I became a scientist. I

wanted to work with people who were trying to solve the world's problems. But it looks like it's too late. The world seems bent on destroying itself."

He lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "Maybe you're more right than you know. But I think it's humanity the world wants to destroy."

"That's way harsh." Mercy hoped he wasn't going to start with one of his half-cocked theories again. She noticed a muscle twitch along his jaw line as he focused on the road ahead.

"Harsh?" His lips curled. "Look at what the human race has done to this planet. A new start might not be a bad idea."

"Hey, you don't mean that," she probed after a long few seconds of silence.

He glanced at her, his dark eyes serious. "Of course I don't mean that. I just get a little angry sometimes. None of this had to happen, you know, if people had only treated the Earth with the respect she deserves."

Mercy shifted her weight in the car seat, troubled by the thought that the earthquakes and volcanic activity following the plague might be more than a coincidence. How could such a nutty idea make so much sense?

Traffic remained light on the tollway as they headed across the south side of Chicago, and there was still no sign of any roadblocks. "Okay, say you're right and Mom E is a conscious entity," she said slowly, working it out in her mind. "I'll grant you that maybe she doesn't like some of the things we've done. But have we done anything so unforgivable that she'd want to eliminate the lot of us?"

He glanced over at her with a grim expression. "I can't believe you need to ask that question. Humanity has overrun the whole planet with an unchecked population explosion, wiped out countless species, polluted the air and the water, drained the oil from the ground, and now the biotech people are destroying the work of millions of years of evolution by

tampering with the very genes of plants and animals. If I were Mom E, I'd be feeling plenty damned nervous, maybe even pissed."

Mercy rolled her eyes. "I guess it's a good thing you're not, then. We're in enough danger without ticking off an entire planet."

She leaned back in the car seat and folded her arms across her chest. How could a man be so charming, so handsome and a crazy zealot at the same time? It was just her stupid luck with men. So what if he was a hunk? She should have known Noah was too good to be true. If only her toes weren't still curling from the orgasm she'd had.

Well, forget it. She wasn't having sex again with this nut case.

She glanced sideways and saw he was staring straight ahead, his eyes on the road, alert for hazards. Well, at least he was a cautious nut case. And a nut case with a plan. Her eyes followed the strong curve of his jaw, and her heart softened. If only he weren't such a handsome nut case. Maybe it wouldn't hurt anything to listen to his weird ideas.

His hands tightened on the wheel. "I'm sorry to say this, but I'm afraid you have ticked off the planet. Humanity created this plague. If it's the last straw for Mom E, it's your own fault."

She rubbed her palms over her thighs, troubled by his words. Gazing out the window, she pondered the wrecked buildings flashing past as they fled through the devastated city. The earth had certainly exploded. She couldn't deny that. But what he was saying was impossible. And why did he keep talking about the human race as if he didn't belong?

"You keep speaking about humanity as if you aren't one of us," she challenged him. "I'd say we're all in this together."

"Do I?" He turned his head and the radiant compassion shining in his gaze unfroze the little frisson of fear that had run through her heart. "I'm just trying to make you understand how serious such a situation would be. Believe me, an angry Mom E is a grave matter. And if I'm right, why, the human race should be doing everything it can to change her mind."

“And exactly how would we do that?” she wondered. A sudden image of Noah talking to a clump of flowers flashed through her mind. Despite the serious tone of their conversation, she chuckled.

He shrugged. “Any intelligent being possesses the ability to communicate. If the planet is conscious, then there’s a way to talk to her.”

“But how would you convince her to stop?”

He turned to her again with an almost frightening intensity in his gaze. “I’d have to show her there’s hope for humanity. I’d have to find a human whose actions would convince her to relent. I’d look for a very special human.”

“Well, good luck with that. I hope there are still some heroes out there somewhere.” Mercy jerked around in her seat as they flew past a highway sign. “Say, wasn’t that your exit? I thought you were going to stop at your apartment.”

His hands clutched the wheel. “No time. We need to get out of the city before roadblocks go up. Besides, I’ve got some extra clothes in that backpack. I was planning on leaving the city for a few days, anyway, after our picnic in the preserve.”

“Oh.” She sniffed, wondering if she should be offended. What was she, a last fling?

He tilted his head to one side, his dazzling smile once more in evidence. “I planned to ask you to come along. Really, I did.”

The sincerity vibrating through every word convinced her. “I believe you. It’s just that this is all happening so fast.” She shook her head, trying to break free of a feeling of unreality. Everything had happened with mind-blowing speed since the first earthquake. No way had she planned for this day to include fleeing from the city with a man she barely knew. Noah had taken charge and made their plans. It was almost as if he’d kidnapped her.

Nonsense. The man certainly couldn’t have known about the earthquakes, or the impending eruption. She didn’t believe in psychic powers.

“I know it’s fast. It must be unsettling for you.” Noah spoke as if he guessed her thoughts. It was uncanny how well he understood her.

She toyed with her seat belt and then blurted out her sudden concern. “It’s just that you’ve been making all the choices here. I’ve always run my life. With an alcoholic father, I had to grow up in a hurry. I learned to make my own decisions.”

“Sorry.” His mouth softened into a smile. “I didn’t mean to take over. Getting out of town seemed urgent.”

Mercy gave the seat belt a tug. He was right, but she needed to assert some control, too. “Won’t we need to stop for gas on the way?”

He frowned. “Probably, once we’re out of Chicago. Does it matter where?”

“There’s a big Flying J truck stop in Indiana. I pass it whenever I go to Indianapolis. I’ll bet they’re still open despite everything. We should stop there. It would be much more practical than a gas station. We could buy some extra supplies, too, maybe a pair of jeans and a jacket for you. I’ve been thinking the weather might change drastically if the volcano does erupt.” She stared pointedly at his white shorts.

“Good point. I don’t usually stop at truck stops, but you’re right.” He reached across the space between them and squeezed her knee. “Thanks.”

Mercy relaxed back into her seat and pondered his profile as he drove. He might have some strange views, but the man actually seemed to care about her. The warm, safe feeling he seemed to evoke so easily had returned. It was more than the great sex they’d shared. He radiated a sense of calm and purpose that made her feel protected. Had she finally found a man she could trust?

To the north, the city’s skyline became visible. It looked familiar and yet different. After a moment, she realized that there were gaping holes where buildings had once stood, mute evidence of the earthquake earlier. More cars were starting to crowd the expressway, too, as people began to react to the news that the plague had spread to the city.

They passed over the state line into Indiana and Noah breathed an audible sigh of relief. “That was the trickiest part. I was afraid we wouldn’t get out of Chicago before martial law is enforced. But we made it. Once we’re out of these suburbs in western Indiana, it should be clear sailing.”

Mercy pulled a map out of the glove compartment and checked their route. As they drove deeper into Indiana, the Flying J she’d remembered appeared.

“We’re stopping here for gas,” she reminded Noah.

“Sure thing.” He pulled into the lot and found a free pump. The Flying J was packed with cars and trucks but uncannily silent. The man on the other side of the island wore a worried expression as he forced the last possible drop of gas into his Toyota.

“You get the gas. I’ll scout the store for supplies,” Mercy told Noah as she hopped out of the car. She headed inside. The Flying J catered to truckers. There were audio books and DVDs for sale but she passed those by and headed to the clothes rack. As she’d hoped, the store had jackets. She picked one out for herself and then hunted through the men’s section until she found one that would fit Noah’s broad shoulders.

She turned to find Noah striding up behind her. “Got the gas,” he announced.

“Good. Try on this jacket and go get yourself a pair of jeans. She nodded to another rack of clothing. “If we’re having an adventure, we need to be prepared.”

“I like your spirit.” Noah grinned.

After picking out a pair of jeans and purchasing them, Noah went into the rest room and changed. Mercy grabbed the opportunity to buy some more food. Remembering Noah’s earlier longing for coffee, she snagged them two travel cups full of a strong Columbian blend. Half an hour later they staggered out of the store with arms loaded with packages

“Now I feel ready for Kentucky,” Noah said, pulling open the car door for Mercy.

The traffic was notably heavier when they pulled back onto the interstate. “People are starting to panic and run,” Noah observed. “We should get off the main highways and do our

traveling on some back roads I know. If the volcano erupts, the interstates are likely to be jammed anyway, with people headed east. On the back roads, we'll stay away from possibly infected people and still make good time. With luck, we should be there by morning." He winked at her. "How does powdered eggs and freeze-dried coffee sound for breakfast?"

"Sounds great." She reached for the switch to the radio. "Mind if we catch some news?"

"No. Turn it on. We need to stay informed, as long as the networks are still operating."

Mercy lifted her brows, wondering what he meant by that, then switched on the radio and turned the dial to 890, WLS, an all-talk station. One of the afternoon DJs was babbling away, a slightly frantic note in his voice. "The death toll from today's earthquake now stands at seven hundred fifty and rising. Power is still out in most of the city, but thanks to our emergency backup generators, we can remain on the air. Power outages are more sporadic in the suburbs. Emergency crews and national guardsmen have their hands full at the moment digging victims out of the rubble, and that means that no roadblocks have yet been set up to enforce the quarantine now in effect around Chicago. However, we have reports from the AP news bureau in Washington that extra troops are flying in from Kansas to enforce the martial law. They should be landing at O'Hare in a couple of hours."

Noah raked a hand through his hair. "Told you. We got out just in time."

"So," the DJ continued, "our phone lines are open." He gave a nervous laugh. "If your phones are working, that is. I'm wondering what worries you more. The plague or the earthquake and its aftershocks or the super volcano that is supposedly on the brink of eruption. Yes, caller, you're on the air."

"I can't believe this," a female voice proclaimed from the car radio. "I moved here from LA just two months ago, thinking I was moving somewhere safe, somewhere far away from earthquakes. Now I've got earthquakes and plague, and nothing's happening to LA -- nothing."

The DJ laughed, but it had a bitter sound. “I doubt that’s true. It’s pretty obvious that air travelers have spread the plague far and wide. Maybe they’re hushing up the cases out West. If it’s any consolation to you, LA will be buried in the ash if the volcano goes off. In fact, if Yellowstone blows its top, I guess we can all kiss it goodbye.”

“Well, in the meantime, I’m thinking of moving back to LA, if I survive this plague, that is.”

“Excuse me,” the DJ interrupted. “We’re cutting away for a bulletin from the network.”

Chapter Seven

Mercy felt a stab of fear. She leaned forward in her seat as music swelled in the background and then another voice spoke, quick and urgent.

“The National Earthquake Information Center reports that an eruption of the long-dormant super volcano beneath Yellowstone National Park appears imminent. I repeat, an eruption is expected within the hour. Geysers and hot springs within the park are reported to be erupting out of control as pressure builds in the magma chamber beneath the earth. The ground near Old Faithful has risen several feet. Dr. Richard Shark, an expert on volcanoes who is on the scene monitoring the situation, predicts an enormous explosion. He says ground surface deformation is a reliable indicator of an impending eruption. The government has ordered all residents within a hundred mile radius of the park to begin an emergency evacuation.”

The Mustang’s engine roared as the car suddenly sped up.

“What are you doing?” Mercy demanded. “You’ll get us arrested.”

Noah’s mouth twitched. “The cops have more important things to do right now than give out speeding tickets. I’m guessing, but I imagine if that volcano goes, it’ll only be a matter of hours before travel becomes difficult. For one thing, the ash cloud might reach this

far. Even if it doesn't, there'll be immediate, terrible effects. The weather will change drastically."

Mercy stared at the clear, dry road in front of them and shook her head. It seemed incredible to think that something so bizarre, so unthinkable, could actually happen. How far away was Yellowstone anyway? Five hundred miles, a thousand? The ash would never reach this far.

"It'll never reach this far," she said aloud.

Noah's chin jutted out as he surveyed the road ahead, weaving around the occasional broken stretch of pavement they still encountered, a constant reminder of the earthquake earlier. "I hope you're right. Maybe the ash cloud will stay west of the Mississippi if we're lucky. Even so, it will still block a tremendous amount of sunlight and cause an abrupt drop in temperature over the entire country. If we don't get ash, we may well see snow."

"Snow!" Mercy shivered. It was June, for heaven's sake. Thank god they'd both purchased jackets at the truck stop. "I realize volcanic ash will block the sun, but can it make the weather turn that cold? That fast?"

Noah shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. I have a strong feeling that it's going to snow, though. Maybe it's something else Mother Earth has planned. Maybe the jet stream will shift. Or there could even be a polar shift."

Mercy looked at him askance. "You have a feeling?"

He switched lanes to pass a slower SUV. "I get intuitions. I know things about people, about what's going to happen."

She forced a laugh. She remembered how he'd told her once before that he had intuitions. She hadn't taken it seriously then. She'd been too busy thinking about getting laid. Now she was concerned. Suddenly, her life might depend on his intuitive gift. "You are the Noah McKnight who worked at the lab with me, aren't you? Because he was a scientist."

“And scientists don’t believe in crazy things like intuition.” Noah flashed his dazzling grin at her. Although she tried to cling to her skepticism, her heart warmed. The man oozed charm. He didn’t seem the least bit offended by her sharp questions. “You haven’t studied much about the history of science if you believe that. Some of the greatest breakthroughs have come through human intuition. Some have even come through dreams.”

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow. “Tell me more.”

He looked smug. “Dmitri Mendeleev.”

“Excuse me?”

“He’s the man who discovered that the natural elements can be arranged neatly and logically in a regular fashion, based on simple properties such as their atomic number. He created the Periodic Table. That idea came from a dream.”

Mercy shifted uneasily in her seat. She didn’t want to believe any of this. Unfortunately, she’d had some eerie dreams herself. A chill ran down her spine. Those dreams had come true. What if Noah was on to something with this crazy theory?

He took one hand off the wheel and waved it in the air, obviously invigorated by their debate. “Aristotle said, ‘Intuition is the source of scientific knowledge.’”

Despite her best efforts, a smile tugged at her lips. “Well, I can’t argue with Aristotle.”

Noah grinned. His eyes shone with excitement as he drove home his point. “I’ve got an even better one. Albert Einstein said, ‘To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science.’”

“Okay.” She lifted both hands in mock surrender. “I guess intuition does have a place in science. I just hope you’re wrong about Mom E being so angry with the human race.”

Immediately his face sobered. “Believe me, I wish I were. I’d love to be wrong. I’m afraid, though, that the earth’s upheavals are only starting.”

Mercy turned her head to look out the window at the passing scenery. White clouds floated in a summer-blue sky. Lush green fields held grazing cattle. A lake glittered in the distance. The world seemed peaceful, even serene. She didn't quite know what to make of Noah's ideas, but his obvious enthusiasm for his subject disarmed her anxiety. He certainly thought outside the box, and that was what scientific geniuses were supposed to do. Maybe he was on to something.

"If only there were a way to apologize and start again," she murmured.

"Apologize?"

"To Mom E." Impulsively, she reached out and touched his knee. "That's what people do when they have a misunderstanding. They talk and learn to appreciate each other's viewpoints."

He covered her hand with his in a quick caress that sent hot rivers of desire coursing through her veins. "Like we're doing now. I had the impression earlier that you thought I was some sort of wacko."

"You did sound like an extremist, but I have to admit that extreme things are happening."

His fingers curled around hers, and she felt as though she were about to liquefy into a puddle on the seat. He turned his head to look into her face, his eyes like two mysterious black pools. "I'm surprised you aren't passionate about protecting the Earth too, Mercy. You seem like such a caring person."

A stab of guilt shot through her. "I do care. I guess my focus has always been on helping people, not trees or fish."

"People need a clean environment. They need to experience a connection with the planet that nurtures their very existence."

"You're right. I just never thought about it that way."

Their hands linked, they drove on as the sun sank lower in the sky behind them. Her stomach was growling its hunger by the time Noah pulled off on the side of the road for a brief meal. They fished the leftover cheese and bread, peanut butter, a bag of chocolate chip cookies and a few bottles of water out of the trunk of the car.

“Not very nutritious, but it filled my stomach.” Noah winked as he grabbed the last cookie and split it in two. “Here. I like sharing things with you.”

“Thanks.” Unaccountably pleased, Mercy bit into the sweet morsel.

Noah waited until she stopped chewing, then leaned across the center console to claim a kiss. “Umm, sweet.”

When they resumed travel, Noah turned off the state highway onto a county road. “I’ve taken this route before,” he told Mercy. “It’s longer, but we bypass all the big cities where there’s bound to be trouble by now. And there’s hardly any traffic.”

The sky darkened with the approaching night as they drove through the back roads of Indiana. Mercy had curled up in her seat and started to doze off when a jolt shook the car.

“Whoa!” Noah hunched over on the wheel while he fought to keep the Mustang on the road. “Must have been another earthquake back in Chicago.”

“Or even further west.” An icy fear gripped Mercy’s heart. She switched on the radio again.

After a few minutes, an announcer broke into the regular program, his voice high-pitched with excitement. “ABC News reports the super volcano has erupted.”

“Oh, no.” Mercy’s heart sank. So many disasters. It did seem too much to be a coincidence. Could Noah’s wild theory possibly be correct?

She held her breath as they both listened to the dreaded news. Scientists were predicting the ash from the eruption would cover an area six hundred miles wide around Yellowstone.

“Six hundred miles.” Mercy pulled a map from the glove compartment of the car and switched on the overhead light while Noah concentrated on driving. After some calculations, she looked up with a weak smile. “It’ll stay west of the Mississippi. Maybe we’ll be okay after all.”

As she spoke, a gust of wind buffeted the car. They were going south now. A tight hand squeezed her chest as she pictured them, caught between the plague to the east and the volcano to the west. Turning to her right, she saw a bank of clouds engulf the setting sun -- clouds coming in from the west. Her throat tightened in fear.

The fading daylight dimmed even further as the cloudbank spread across the sky. Noah glanced upward from his driving. “The explosion in Yellowstone must have played havoc with the jet stream to create clouds this far east this fast.”

“Or maybe Mother Nature is giving the jet stream a push.” Mercy’s voice rose and cracked. This was exactly what Noah had predicted. Her heart hammered against her ribs in sudden fear.

Noah shot her a troubled look. “Could be. Maybe she’s putting humanity to the test, seeing if we deserve to survive.”

Mercy bit down on her lip, glad that at least he’d included himself with the rest of the human race this time.

“We’re looking at a big change in the weather, maybe global winter,” he continued.

“You can’t be serious!”

“Unfortunately, I am.”

The wind grew stronger with frightening suddenness. The car constantly shook under its buffeting gusts. Noah’s knuckles turned white where he gripped the wheel. Mercy was about to offer to drive for a while when she spotted something ahead on the road.

“Stop, Noah,” she commanded, pointing. “It looks like someone’s gone off into a ditch there.”

She could see a Dodge minivan, nose down in a steep embankment, its rear wheels off the ground and spinning. A woman stood next to the road on the driver's side with a little girl clutched in her arms. She looked young, in her twenties, and scared. Her dirty blond hair pulled back into a pony tail, she was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

Noah glanced out the window and shook his head. "Can't stop. It's too dangerous."

"Don't be ridiculous." Mercy glared at him. "That's a woman and a child. How dangerous can they be?"

Noah said nothing. He set his jaw and stared ahead, his foot continuing to press down on the gas. Their speed hadn't slowed at all and within a minute, they'd be past the stranded car.

Mercy reached over and grabbed the wheel. "Noah McKnight, you stop right now, or I swear I'll give this thing a yank and put us in the ditch beside them."

Noah turned to stare at her, his dark eyes blazing with some strong emotion she couldn't quite identify. His jaw muscles swelled as he ground his teeth. Their gazes locked.

"I mean it." She tightened her grip on the wheel and set her mouth in a hard line, determined to face him down.

Emotion flashed deep in his eyes. Was it relief? She couldn't be sure. He looked away and stomped his foot down on the brake. "I hope this isn't a mistake." The Mustang's tires squealed as it screeched to a halt a few feet behind the van.

A glad smile spread across the woman's face. She started toward them. Mercy reached out to touch Noah's arm, but he pulled away. Turning in his seat, he aimed a measuring gaze at her. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

She nodded. "I know we're taking a chance, but we have to. The world may be ending, but that doesn't mean I'm giving up on being a compassionate, caring human being."

Noah drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he watched the woman walk up to them, her child propped on her hip. Mercy saw his lips twitch, for all the world as if he were

fighting a smile. What was going on with him? He had urged her not to help, but she had the strong feeling that he was pleased with her insistence. He sighed. "Okay. You're right, and I'm wrong. Let's just not try to save the whole world, okay?"

"I thought you wanted to save the world," Mercy shot back. "I'm just trying to do my small part."

"Okay, point taken." Reaching into the back seat, he grabbed Mercy's new jacket and handed it to her. "Put this on. The sun's gone down, and it's going to get colder."

Grateful for the truce, Mercy hopped out of the car. The air outside the Mustang was decidedly colder, and her curls flew around her ears in the wind. Hunching her shoulders, she pulled on the jacket and approached the woman. "Are you okay?"

The woman set her child, a girl of around three or four, on her feet and grasped her hand. She held her other hand out to Mercy. "I'm okay. Meg here is okay. But my husband's still in the van. He hit his head on the windshield."

"What happened?"

"A deer jumped out in front of us and hit the right fender. We swerved, almost lost control, and the van went off the road. We sure could use a ride to the nearest hospital."

"Is he conscious? Does he have any broken bones?" Mercy's heart went out to the frightened young woman. She glanced around but saw no sign of the deer. It must have survived the collision and run back into the trees.

"I don't know. He won't wake up, and he's too heavy for me to move. Can you look at him please?"

"No problem." Mercy turned to Noah who still sat in the driver's seat. "Come with me, will you? Maybe between the two of us we can get him out of there and into your car."

She saw him hesitate and shot a fierce glare his way. Maybe she'd made a mistake hooking up with him, after all. They barely knew each other despite the hot sex they'd

shared, but if this lack of compassion was typical, he wasn't the right man for her. She'd always gone the extra mile to help people, and she wasn't about to stop now.

Noah arched his eyebrows at her glare and turned his one-hundred megawatt smile on the woman. He got out of the Mustang, flexed his arms and reached into the back seat for his own jacket. "I'd be glad to help."

"Great." Mercy frowned, noticing the admiring look the woman directed at his broad-shouldered frame as he pulled on his coat. She grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the van. The right front fender was bashed and twisted and the front tire looked shredded beyond repair.

As she reached out for the front door handle, the man popped up in the seat and threw the door open. She backed away, shocked, at the sight of a gun in his hand.

He faced them with a wide, triumphant grin, and pointed the gun at Noah. "Good work, Lilly. I knew you could lure them away from their car. Don't move, mister!" he added to Noah who had taken a step toward him. "I will shoot. Your lady friend first and then you."

"Shit!" Mercy normally didn't swear, but these circumstances seemed to demand it. "Listen, you don't need a gun. We're more than willing to drive all of you to the next town."

The man laughed. "We need to go farther than the next town and this van ain't gonna make it. Ain't you been listening to the news? It's survival of the fittest these days in this country, and only gonna get worse."

"But we stopped to help you!" Mercy wailed.

"More fool you." The man climbed out of the van, keeping the gun on the two of them, and jerked his head at his wife. "Get to work, Lilly. Load our stuff in the back of that there Mustang."

Mercy watched as Lilly hauled two battered suitcases out of the van and threw them in the back seat of the Mustang. Beside her, Noah stood silent, his arms folded, his mouth set in a grim line.

The wind blew through Mercy's hair, touching her cheeks with icy fingers. Overhead, thick gray clouds covered the entire sky. The sun was a dim orange glow, fading on the far horizon. Soon it would be pitch black night. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her body. "You can't do this, you can't leave us here."

The man pointed the gun at her. "Would you rather have a bullet in the head? Come to think of it, you might be better off dead, considering what's coming. It's judgment day."

"That's enough threatening," Noah growled, unfolding his arms and clenching his fists. His face held a look of deadly danger.

"Hey, I'm the one with the gun." The man waved the weapon at them, but Mercy noticed that he'd taken a step backward.

His wife had already hopped in the Mustang and held their young daughter perched on her lap. She leaned across the driver's seat and pushed open the door. "Get in, honey," she called. "Let's get out of here."

Keeping his gaze locked with Noah's in a duel of wills, the man backed into the driver's seat. He pulled the door shut and started the car with one hand while the other hand kept the gun pointed straight at Noah.

As he shifted the Mustang into gear, his eyes narrowed and Mercy's heart lurched in fear. Maybe he meant to shoot them after all. Instead, he grinned and hit the gas, sending gravel spinning outward to strike them. "Thanks for the car and have a great life -- what's left of it!" His cruel laughter drifted back to them as the car sped down the road.

Mercy heaved a sigh of relief, then bit her lip and looked at Noah who was staring at the rear lights of the Mustang as they vanished over a hill. "Okay, I really screwed things up for us. Go ahead and tell me so."

Noah glanced heavenward. The clouds were thicker, darker, and the wind now had a definite knife's-edge of cold to it. "Things are pretty messed up at the moment, I admit. But you wanted to do the right thing, and I can't blame you for that, or for the plague or the

volcano.” He turned to her with an unexpected smile. “Blaming isn’t going to change anything. Actually, I’m proud of you for having the courage to care about other people in the middle of a disaster.”

Her cheeks grew hot despite the cold edge to the wind. “Anyone would do the same.”

“No, they wouldn’t.” His voice held a quiet conviction. “That’s one reason Mom E is so fed up with humanity. Theoretically, of course,” he added with a quick smile. “But if she sees enough actions like yours in the midst of this disaster, maybe she’ll change her mind.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.” His voice warmed with his usual enthusiasm for this peculiar subject. “I thought the first time I saw you that you were the kind of person who would risk anything to help others.”

“You did?” Mercy frowned.

Noah pulled one of the van’s doors open and poked his head inside. “Damn! They didn’t leave anything behind. Not even a blanket.” He walked around to the front of the van and examined the damage. “Even if I could hot wire it and get it started, it doesn’t look drivable.”

Mercy glanced down the deserted road. “Maybe someone will stop and help us.” She stuck out her chin. “People do help other people all the time, you know, despite what you might think. Lots of people would have done what I did.”

Noah looked up from his examination of the van. “I know. The difference is in the intent. Most people would run at the first sign of danger but your intent to help others is strong and pure. I’ve never met anyone like you. I believe you’d willingly risk your very life to save someone.”

The passion in his voice amazed her. Where did he get these ideas about her? Did he think he had some sort of insight into her soul with his supposed intuition? “Hey, you hardly

know me.” She felt hot blood rush to her cheeks again as his eyes sparkled, and his lips twitched upward in grin.

“Well, we are getting to know each other better, even intimately.” His voice had turned into that sexy rumble that made her whole body vibrate with desire. “But like I said, I realized you were something special the moment I saw you. You had a glow around you, shall we say? I knew you were the kind of person who might convince Mom E to change her mind.”

Whoa. The warm tingle in Mercy’s heart abruptly changed to an icy chill. *He’s talking like he picked me for something.*

“What do you mean?” she asked, choosing her words with care. With a sinking heart, she realized she was alone on a deserted road with a guy who sounded like a nut case. “Are you saying you knew what was going to happen? The plague? The earthquake? The eruption?”

To her alarm, he nodded. “I didn’t know the exact details, but I knew disaster was at hand. And that Mother Earth would have to be convinced to relent.”

Mercy drew in a sharp breath. Oh, gosh. He was a wacko. Worse, he was a wacko who was using her in his own bizarre scheme. Her heart started to pound. When would she learn that men always failed you just when you needed them the most?

He seemed to sense her distress. He took a step closer. “Hey, when I said it would take someone special, I meant it. The only thing is, I didn’t realize how really special you are until today.” He gave her a disarming grin. “All I want to do is help stop this disaster somehow.”

She gestured at the road and the gathering dark. A gust of icy wind stirred her mop of curls. Fear made her throat tight. “Not much we can do here, is there?”

“No.” His quick agreement reassured her. “We can’t do anything to stop the disaster right now. We have to find some shelter. That’s our first priority. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He sounded calm and reasonable. Mercy shook off her anxieties. She had more immediate worries. Wrapping her arms around her body in an attempt to keep warm, she surveyed the empty road. Darkness was settling in, and she had no idea where they were.

Noah reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “We’ll be okay. I made a promise to get you safely to Kentucky, and I intend to keep it.”

The conviction in his voice stirred a flicker of hope in her heart. He tilted his head to one side and summoned up a teasing grin. “Besides, if I had to be stranded on a road waiting for the end of the world, I can’t think of anyone I’d rather be with.”

His grin warmed her clear down to her toes. The dread that had wrapped around her like a cloak seemed to fall away. “Oh, wow! That’s so sweet.” Impulsively, she threw her arms around his neck and planted a kiss on his lips. The heat of his mouth felt wonderful. Suddenly she just wanted to get him somewhere where they could snuggle against the gathering cold. So what if he’d had some idea of using her. She could find some uses for his glorious male body, too.

She turned her head to stare at the abandoned van. “Hey, we could spend the night in there.”

Noah shook his head. “I’m afraid we might wake up as popsicles in the morning. No, this might be a back road, but it’ll bring us to a highway eventually. If we keep walking we’ll come on a farmhouse or a town, and hopefully someone will take us in for the night. Tomorrow I’ll see about renting another car.”

Mercy nodded, glad now she’d put on her walking shoes, and even more grateful he had insisted on her putting on her coat when they got out of the car. She slipped her hand back into Noah’s, savoring the strength of the fingers that wrapped around hers. She tried to keep her tone light. “A romantic stroll sounds great.”

As if to mock her, the wind picked up another notch, howling through the trees, gusting with a force that nearly knocked her from her feet. At the same time, she felt a tiny

prick of something cold landing on her forehead. She glanced up to see snow starting to fall from the sky.

Chapter Eight

The clanking, metallic sound of a garage door opening jerked Mercy to wakefulness. For a long second she gazed around stupefied, still half asleep and not at all sure where she was. She was sitting on a couch and the painful throbbing of her neck told her that she'd fallen asleep while watching TV. In front of her, a network anchor from CNN was droning on about the various disasters afflicting the country.

The past few hours came back to her in a rush: She and Noah had walked through the swirling snow, shivering with cold, searching for any shelter. The snow had begun as a few flakes, a light dusting on the ground, but as the hours passed, it grew thicker, coating the road with a slick, slippery glaze.

They'd stopped at two different farmhouses, but had been turned away from both at gunpoint, the occupants afraid they might bring the plague with them. By then, Mercy could no longer feel her feet, and her body shook constantly with cold. She'd almost lost hope when, as if guided by some inner radar, Noah had spotted this house nestled off the road behind some trees, its windows dark. No one had been home, but they'd been too desperate to worry about legalities. Noah had broken a basement window and climbed inside. A few minutes later, he'd opened the front door and Mercy had stumbled into welcome warmth.

Noah! After they'd warmed their frozen hands and feet and raided the refrigerator for something to eat, he'd gone out to look in the garage. She'd curled up with a blanket in front of the TV where, snug and full at last, she'd promptly fallen asleep.

Now Mercy ran to the living room window and pressed her nose to the icy pane, staring out into the darkness. The storm had intensified while she slept, and gusts of wind blew a thick blanket of snow before them. She heard a muted roar over the storm and looked to the right. Headlights shone out of the garage, light gleaming off the white flakes, as a massive pickup truck came rolling out. The steady chug of its diesel engine grew audible even through the walls of the house. Its headlights swept across the window where she stood watching as it turned into the lane that led to the highway. Inside the cab, the dark form of a driver hunched over the wheel.

"Noah! Wait!" she yelled, although there was no way he could hear her. He was leaving without her. Her heart jumped into her throat and a whirlwind of terrible feelings from her childhood came rushing back. Her mind reeled with the same helpless, sinking feeling that had assaulted her each time her father had marched out the door to start another drunk, leaving her alone.

She'd thought Noah was different, despite his fervent beliefs, maybe even because of them. At least he cared about something. What was going on? Was he angry at her after all? She *had* nearly gotten them killed.

Terrified at the thought of Noah leaving her alone, Mercy ran to the front door and threw it open. The tail lights of the pickup vanished as the truck headed for the highway. Without thinking, she dashed outside into the bitter cold, her bare feet sliding on the ice. Her walking shoes, sopping wet from the hike to this house in the storm, lay drying on a radiator in the bedroom.

Bitter cold sent shockwaves of pain up her legs as her feet sank ankle-deep into a snow drift. Her toes throbbed with instant agony. She forced her legs to move, slogging through the snow toward the tracks left by the pickup. Tears pricked at her eyes, but the moisture

froze in the corners before a single drop could fall. Her shivers turned to shudders as the cold wracked her bones. She couldn't feel the ground beneath her feet anymore, couldn't feel anything below her knees except for waves of bone-chilling pain. She stumbled and fell, her heart heavy with despair.

The roar of a pickup diesel filled her ears. The sound made her dizzy with sudden hope. Was Noah coming back for her? She lifted her head, but the glare of headlights blinded her as the pickup skidded to a stop a few feet in front of her.

Noah jumped out and ran toward her. "Mercy! What in God's name are you doing? I almost ran you over!"

"I-I --" Her teeth rattled so hard she couldn't speak. She was afraid to even try; afraid she might bite her tongue in half. Noah took one look at her, his dark eyes flashing, then reached down and scooped her up into his arms.

Cradled against his chest, she half-sobbed in relief.

"Baby, baby, it's all right," he crooned to her, his voice tender. His arms held her close, their rock-hard strength and warmth calming her fears. She pressed her frozen cheek against the rough wool of the thick winter coat he'd found in a closet. His arms tightened their grip as she squirmed with embarrassment. How could she have ever thought for a moment he would abandon her? Hadn't he explained to her that he needed to find people who would give even their life for others? Surely, he had to be like that, too.

Six quick strides brought them back into the house. He slammed the front door shut behind them with his foot and carried her into the bedroom.

"What were you trying to do?" he demanded as he laid her on the bed. He tugged and arranged the sheet and blanket and quilt over her.

Mercy huddled deep inside the cocoon of bed coverings, wishing she could pull them over her head. She'd always known she had trust issues, and now she'd acted like an insecure fool. "I-I heard the garage door open and the truck start up, and I thought you were leaving."

“Leaving?” He stood with his head tilted to one side, his eyes narrowed, as he examined her. Melting snow glittered in his hair. “What kind of jerk do you think I am?”

She lowered her gaze. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m still feeling guilty for nearly getting us killed. I wouldn’t blame you if you did leave without me.”

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her head again. Plague. Earthquake. Volcanoes. Snow in June. The world seemed to be ending. The horror all around them demanded painful honesty. “I-I don’t always trust men. You’d said earlier that you chose me for a reason. So it seemed like you were just using me as part of your theory. And I thought maybe when you saw how much danger was really involved, you decided to leave.”

He folded his arms across his broad chest and glared at her. “I don’t leave people I care about.”

A thrill of joy leapt through her despite his angry stance. Sincerity rang in his words. He hadn’t been leaving. He’d brought the truck back.

She lifted her chin higher. Honesty. That was the one thing they had could cling to in a world gone crazy. If she couldn’t trust him, she really was alone. She had to tell him the truth. “I nearly got us both killed. I’d do it again in a heartbeat. If the world really is ending, there are going to be many people in trouble. And I’m going to help. You’d better know that if you’re going to stick with me.”

To her surprise, he reached out and touched her cheek. It was a gentle touch but it sent a searing jolt of electricity clear down to the soles of her feet. “I told you I thought it was the right thing to do, even though it did turn out that they’d set a trap for us. Or did you think I’d lie to you like so many Earthmen?”

His touch had started her hormones raging again, but his words still caught her attention. She frowned up at him. Earthmen. What an odd thing to say. This unending nightmare of one disaster after another was making both of them a little bit nuts. She pulled

the covers closer and tried to control the shudders that wracked her body, but they wouldn't stop.

"Oh, hell!" With a snort of disgust, Noah kicked off the boots he'd also found, and threw the wool coat onto a chair. Then he climbed into the big bed beside her and pulled her close.

Mercy forgot her worries as he pressed the hard, lean length of his body against hers. Sighing with gladness, she molded herself to his masculine strength. Even through his clothes, he radiated heat like a coal stove on a wintry night. Not to mention the even hotter flame that he sparked deep within her core. Already she could feel her blood starting to heat to a fierce simmer as his fingers caressed her cheek and pushed back a stray lock of hair from her face. She cuddled closer in gratitude and let his warmth sink into her bones. Her rigid muscles unlocked and relaxed as her shudders lessened to shivers and then began to subside altogether. A little hum of contentment rose up in her throat. The world might be ending, but at least Noah was there to share it with her.

"Feeling warmer now?" he asked after a few minutes, his voice low and amused.

"Much warmer," she purred.

His fingertip traced a line of fire down her jaw and over to her lips. "I wasn't leaving, you know. I was test driving the pickup. I wanted to be sure it was in good running condition before we got out on the road in it. The storm's getting worse. The rest of the trip from here to Lake Cumberland is going to be a lot tougher."

That sobered her. "I know."

He twisted one of her curls around his finger. "I'd love to spend the night in bed with you, but we can't take the time. The snow's starting to pile up on the road, and who knows how long the local governments will function, plowing and such, when there's a plague on the way. We should snatch an hour or two of sleep at the most and then get going."

Mercy let her gaze wander around the bedroom. Where had the owners gone? On vacation somewhere she guessed, since the house had been left cleaned and in order, and the refrigerator had been practically empty. It was June, after all, despite the blizzard outside. They might have gone on a trip before the plague broke out. They might be trapped in the quarantine in the East.

She shivered again, but not with the cold this time.

“Still chilly?” Noah wrapped his arms tighter around her.

The combined heat of their bodies baked the last of the chill from her bones. As tension drained from her muscles, she realized the foolishness of her earlier fear. Feeling a little shy, she touched his cheek. Rough golden stubble had started to grow there. Wondering how he’d look with a beard, she ran her hands up through his thick, silky hair. There was a bond forming between them, a bond she wanted to strengthen.

“No.” She smiled up into his face. His obsidian eyes gazed into hers, kindling a smoldering flame deep in her core. “Actually, I’m getting a little warm.”

Outside, he’d picked her up so effortlessly, as if she weighed nothing. She could feel the hardness of those muscles now through his clothes. He was strong, caring, smart, and he was sticking with her. He liked the way she was.

For a brief instant, she wondered how she’d gotten so lucky. Who cared if the world was ending when you were in bed with a hunk? The arms that held her had a steely strength that was reassuring when she considered the uncertain future ahead. She’d always dealt with life on her own terms. But when the world was ending, independence was not a good thing. She snuggled closer, her pelvis pressing against his. The firm bulge of his cock told her he shared her arousal.

Staring into the deep, dark pools of Noah’s eyes, Mercy began to feel as if she were drowning. The man had an energy that drew her ever closer. In yesterday’s world, a world that now seemed more and more like a dream, she’d earned a good living and had been

proud to forge her own way. However, the end of the world was a different story. She didn't want to face that alone. She suspected no one did.

Impulsively, she sat up in the bed and threw back the covers. As Noah gazed up at her, startled, she stripped off her blouse and her jeans. She hesitated a second, drew a deep breath, and followed that with the removal of her bra and panties.

"That's better," she said, lying back down. A glow of pleasure warmed her blood when his fascinated stare riveted on her nakedness. She stretched out on the sheet, arching her back to emphasize the fullness of her breasts. Her nipples tightened in anticipation as she quirked an eyebrow at Noah. "It feels good to get out of my clothes. How about you? Is it getting hot in here for you, too?"

"Now that you mention it." The mattress creaked as he maneuvered his way out of his garments. Mercy licked her lips, the heat inside her blazing up to a furnace, as she watched the muscles of his back ripple when he pulled off his shirt. He got down to his briefs, hesitated a moment, then slipped them off and tossed them aside too. His cock sprang up, already erect, and she knew with certainty what was to come. Moisture pooled between her legs as she thought of him entering her. God, she wanted him, wanted him as deep in her body as he could get.

"Let's make like spoons."

"Sure." She turned her back on him as he snuggled up to her, his hands coming around to cup her breasts. His fingertips unerringly sought her hardening nipples, brushing across the sensitive nubs. Little electric shocks danced over her nerve endings. At the same moment, the hard, straight length of his aroused manhood pressed against her buttocks. She wiggled closer, determined to seduce him.

"I was planning on getting an hour or two of sleep." He sounded amused. His warm breath blew against the back of her neck, tickling her and making her shiver. Then he began

to kiss the ridge of her spine, his lips tracing a series of slow, sensuous kisses that turned her insides to molten lava.

“Don’t let me stop you,” she purred, grinding her butt against the hard cock that prodded her rear.

He chuckled. “You know I can’t sleep now. All I can think about is you, about burying myself deep in your silken heat.”

His words excited her, rousing a deep and primitive hunger. She rolled her hips, pressing her body back against the juncture of his legs. His hard cock pressed into her flesh, twitching with eagerness. She moaned and more moisture dampened her thighs. God, she was ready. Her sheath throbbed with emptiness, aching to have his thick length fill her. More than that, she wanted to experience that transcendent sense of union with him again. This man touched her soul and awakened needs she’d never known she had.

He kissed her shoulder, then opened his mouth and bit gently, marking her skin with his teeth.

“Wait a minute!” A shudder more violent than any she’d experienced in the earthquake went through her. “You’re not a vampire, are you?”

“No, just hungry for you.” His teeth nibbled at the lobe of her ear. Desired roared through her like a tidal wave. More moisture drenched her pussy, and her taut nipples poked at the palms of his hands as he pressed them against her breasts. She squirmed in his embrace, ready to turn and face him, ready for a long, passionate kiss, but instead he moved his hands on each side of her hips and lifted her up and over onto her knees, her buttocks rising up into the air.

Her heartbeat quickened as she realized the position he wanted her to take. She thrust her butt up into the air and leaned forward, resting her weight on her elbows. A sense of wanton freedom bubbled up inside her. This trip with Noah was one unbroken adventure.

His hands spread her thighs apart, stroking the sensitive inner skin. She whimpered with eagerness for more. Cool air played over her heated pussy like an invisible caress, and she licked her lips as she imagined his dark, brooding gaze fastened on her exposed, moist folds. His palm patted the full curve of her butt, the lightest of slaps, warming the flesh, and then something hard and long slipped inside her.

She squeezed her inner muscles and realized it was his finger, probing her. Suddenly greedy for penetration, she backed against it, forcing it in deeper.

“God, you’re soaked,” he gasped and began to move it in and out, in a steady rhythm.

Unbidden, her body responded. She rocked her hips, her butt rising and falling in the air in instinctive synchronization with his thrusts, impaling herself on his finger. Her breasts swayed between her arms with each rocking motion. She closed her eyes, her whole consciousness concentrated on the fierce arousing jabs between her legs. Noah! He drove her mad with desire.

“Hold it.”

Mercy moaned with need as he withdrew the probing finger. Without him, she felt so empty inside. He grabbed her butt again, forcing her to stillness, his hands prying her thighs even further apart. Panting with her growing hunger, she leaned further forward and lifted herself higher, presenting her pussy to him.

Something hard probed at her drenched outer lips, pushing them apart. Compared to the sensation of his finger inside her, his cock felt huge. She gasped at the stretching sensation as the head of his penis pushed into her moisture-drenched opening. The steep angle of penetration seemed to open her up in a new way. Her mind whirled with the impact of his sensual power. She couldn’t get enough of his touch.

He grabbed her hips in both hands, holding her steady, and rammed into her. Heat suffused her face, covered her breasts, exploded from her inner flesh as his hard length sank into her depths. She shuddered from head to toe.

“Noah!” She cried his name, wanting him, craving him.

He was riding her now, his hips thrusting as he drove his cock in and out of her, each stroke inflaming her sensitive sheath. She could feel the pressure mounting in that sharp focal point between her legs, the place where her own super volcano rumbled and seethed as the intense pleasure crested. He’d woken her sensuality from a long sleep and now the raging inner fires blazed into a living inferno.

His hands gripped her shoulders as he slammed his length into her repeatedly. With a sharp cry, she exploded into orgasm. Spasms shook her body as she half collapsed on the bed. Fireworks went off behind her closed eyelids and she spiraled upward toward a place of bright, white light.

Noah stiffened behind her, gasping for air, while he pumped her full of his seed.

At last, he collapsed on the bed beside her. She half rolled over and gave him a dreamy smile. Her body hummed with pleasure. She could feel the slick wetness of his come on her thighs. “We haven’t been using any protection, you know,” she murmured. The musky smell of sex filled the room, the scent of her juices mingled with his semen.

Noah laughed. “A little late to think of that now.”

“I don’t suppose it matters.” She stroked the muscled curve of his arm. He looked adorable with his hair tousled and his face flushed from his exertions. “If the world’s ending, I mean. In fact, I kinda like the idea of dying pregnant, sort of a last gesture of defiance, sticking my nose up in the air at Mother Nature. She may be planning to do us in, but we’ll go down fighting and horny to the end.”

“It wasn’t your nose you were sticking up in the air though.” Noah’s eyes sparkled.

She punched playfully at his shoulder. “So what, now? Are you complaining?”

“Heck, no. But if you keep raising your butt in defiance, I’m never going to get any sleep!”

“Sorry,” Mercy lied. She wasn’t sorry at all. She could hear the wind outside, howling around the corners of the house, the rattle of snow and sleet striking the windows. In an hour or two, they’d have to go back out in that storm if they were going to reach Kentucky before the roads became impassable. But for now, for this moment, she was satiated with pleasure, in the arms of the man she ...

Her eyes opened wide as she followed that thought to its conclusion. What was she thinking? An end-of-the-world crisis and some hot sex, and she was imagining she was in love. That was silly. If the world wasn’t ending, she’d never think such a thing. Why, they’d never even had a real date.

However, the world was ending. Life had taken on a terrible urgency. There was no time for the usual intricate games of courtship. Besides, her heart recognized a mate in Noah McKnight. Despite the growing disaster all around them, he brought her joy. She should savor these moments while they lasted.

She frowned up at the ceiling, her thoughts darkening as they turned to the future. They might reach Kentucky, with a bit of luck, but the ash from the super volcano’s eruption would plunge the world into a new ice age. All that humanity had built over thousands of years was about to be destroyed and there was nothing either of them could do to stop it. If they didn’t die on the road, they’d probably end up starving when their supplies of food ran out, or freezing to death in the unending winter ahead.

A gentle snore buzzed in her ear. Mercy turned her head to see that Noah had fallen asleep. Gold-blond hair fell over his forehead, and thick lashes lay curved against his cheeks. Typical male! Even the end of the world couldn’t keep a man awake after good sex.

She snuggled closer. The future definitely looked bleak yet somehow she couldn’t be pessimistic. She’d worry later -- when they’d made it to Kentucky.

Chapter Nine

The fierce howl of the wind almost drowned out the steady click of the windshield wipers sweeping away the unrelenting snow. Gusts buffeted the pickup truck. Huddled beneath the warmth of a winter coat, with her feet crammed into boots a half-size too small that she'd found in a closet, Melody stared out at the hypnotic curtain of white that continually danced and swirled around them. The rapidly filling tracks of those who had gone before provided the only clue to the location of the road. Everything lay cloaked in a heavy blanket of snow that concealed all familiar landmarks.

They continued their journey south on the back roads. Only a few vehicles passed them. Mercy suspected reports of the plague breaking through the quarantine to the East had scared people back into their homes where they could hole away from the infection. Or perhaps they were afraid of being stranded in the storm if they tried to flee.

Certainly, there was no evidence that highway crews still worked the roads, trying to clear them, no evidence of plowing or salting. Only Noah's supreme driving skill kept them from skidding off into a ditch. Mercy shook her head, fighting to keep her heavy eyelids open. She had to stay awake and keep talking to keep Noah alert. She'd spent the long night sharing her life story. Noah's continual questions and sincere interest had warmed her heart

despite the storm howling beyond the pickup. Now as the first hints of dawn brightened the heavy clouds to the east, she reached for the thermos of coffee they'd filled before leaving the house.

"Want a good-morning cup?"

Noah glanced eastward and blinked. "Guess it is morning. Sure. Hey, we've made it to another day. That's getting to be an accomplishment lately."

She unscrewed the lid and poured some coffee into his travel cup when he held it out, then repeated the process with hers. The hot liquid soothed her throat, which had gone dry from her long monologue.

"I've yakked your ear off about me. But you've hardly said a word."

"Sorry. Driving in this storm takes a lot of concentration."

Reaching out, she laid a hand on his thigh. The familiar gesture excited her. The bond between them had definitely strengthened since their last sexual encounter. Sitting close to him, she sensed a pulsating energy that surrounded him. Was that what he'd been talking about when he'd said she'd glowed the first time he'd seen her? What was it? Some instinctive attraction between them? Maybe she was learning how to use her intuition just by being around him, through some kind of strange sexual osmosis?

Smiling, she studied his face. He looked so capable, his mouth set in a determined line, his chin lifted. His hair, still tousled from their last escapade in bed, gleamed against the dark red of the wool coat he wore. The hands that gripped the wheel were strong, competent, yet tender when they stroked her, lingering over the curves of breast and thigh.

Memories of their night in bed tumbled through her mind. She'd given her body to him so completely. Now she'd opened her soul, in her long, rambling monologue about her life. But what did she know about him? About this man who had so easily taken possession of her body and her heart.

“Come on,” she urged. “You know every boring detail of my life. It’s time for you to confess all. I know you started working at the lab two weeks ago. And I know you like picnics in the park.” Unexpectedly, she blushed. “What else can you tell a girl?”

He half-smiled. “I’m a geek, I’m afraid. I like programming computers and reading SF novels. In my spare time I like to get out into the wilderness and go hiking.”

“No hunting?”

“Only with my camera. I’ve got pictures from all over the --” He clamped his mouth shut suddenly.

“Go on.” She stroked his thigh with her fingers. Lord, how she itched to rip the pants off him and go at it again, right here in the cab of the pickup. She imagined straddling those thighs and lowering herself on his cock as the storm raged around him.

Her skin heated, as if the temperature inside the pickup had gone up several degrees. She took a shaky breath and forced her mind back to the present. “I’d love to know about the exotic places you’ve seen.”

He swallowed and took his eyes from the road to glance down at her hand. “Keep doing that, and we’re going to have a wreck.”

As if his words had the power to conjure the reality, a dark blue car materialized out of the blowing snow ahead, its crumpled front end wrapped around a tree trunk just off the road. As the pickup speeded past, Mercy’s horrified gaze took in the body of a man slumped over the wheel, and a small, desperate face pressed to the back seat window.

“Stop!” she ordered Noah. “You’ve got to stop. There’s a kid in that car.”

Noah gave her a grim glance. “We fell for this once before, remember?”

Her heart sank. They had. Not every accident could be a trap though, and if they didn’t do anything, the memory of that desperate young face staring at her through the snow would haunt her forever.

“You’ve got to stop. We can’t just leave that kid there to die.”

Noah gazed ahead, a muscle in his jaw jumping.

Mercy's fingers dug hard into his thigh. She leaned toward him, her voice urgent. "This road doesn't get a lot of travelers. You told me so yourself. If we don't stop and go back, who knows when someone else might come along? That kid will freeze to death."

Noah turned to her. His obsidian eyes were like two infinite black holes in his taut face. He seemed to be staring into her soul. "We can't save everybody in the world, Mercy."

She gripped his arm, her voice pleading. "Maybe we can't save the whole world, but we can save someone. We can save that child back there. I get that the world is ending, but I'm going to stay human to the end, and that means caring about other people."

His mouth twitched but he kept his foot on the accelerator. "I like your moxie. Do you mean it? You're willing to risk your life? Will you do whatever it takes to be responsible for this kid?"

She bridled at the challenging note in his voice. Who was he to question her? She'd told him before that she intended to help anyone she could, but maybe he hadn't believed her. He wasn't volunteering to do anything.

"Of course I will!" She straightened in her seat and grabbed at the door handle. "And if you don't turn around right now, I'm going to jump out of this truck and go back myself."

"Okay, okay." His foot switched to the brake, pumping gently as he eased the pickup to a stop without throwing it into a skid on the icy road. Mercy bit her lip and held her breath as he maneuvered the pickup through a turn and headed back the way they'd come.

"Watch sharp for it," he warned. "It'll be easy to miss in this blizzard."

"Thanks." She breathed a sigh of relief. "I owe you one."

He shook his head. "No, I owe you. Your pure intent shines out of you like a beacon of hope on a dark night. Your willingness to act is proof there are still people on this planet with compassionate hearts."

She threw him a wary, sideways glance. More odd talk. “Most people have compassionate hearts.”

“Maybe, but not everyone will take a chance to save someone else. Most people don’t have the pure compassion that you possess. The more I challenged you, the stronger it grew. If Mom E is paying attention at all, she’s sensed you by now.”

His words puzzled her but she had no time to think about them. The blue car loomed up out of the storm. It was a clunker, she saw, an old four-door ’70s Chevrolet Impala. Noah brought the pickup to a halt, and she jumped out. Driving snowflakes struck her face like thousands of sharp needles. She heard Noah’s boots crunching through the snow right behind her.

A sinking fear twisted her gut as she rushed up to the car. The driver still hadn’t moved. She pulled on the handle. For a long second, the frozen door resisted. Then it finally opened, snow sliding to the ground. She stuck her numbed fingers on the man’s neck. His flesh felt cold and there was no pulse beneath her fingertips. Bile rose in her throat as she noticed a trickle of blood dripping from the side of his mouth.

“Here, leave him to me.” Noah had come up beside her.

“I think he’s dead.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” He jerked his head at the frightened face staring at both of them from the back seat. “That kid needs you now.”

“Hey, there!” Mercy pulled open the back door and stuck her head inside the car. A young boy who looked to be about eight years old slid away from the door, his eyes wide with fright. “I’m not going to hurt you. We stopped to help.”

The boy had white-blond hair, cut short, and summer-blue eyes, fringed by thick lashes. He stuck out a determined chin, although his mouth trembled. “Is my dad dead?”

Mercy hesitated, her heart like a heavy lump in her chest. The truth was obvious, and this boy looked brave enough to face it. "I'm afraid so. An air bag might have saved him, but --" She let the words die away. The Impala was too old for an air bag.

The boy blinked hard to hold back tears. "I-I thought so. I was staying with him for a few days. But when the earthquake and stuff hit, he decided to take me home to Mom."

Relief washed over Mercy. The kid had a mom and a place to go. "Well, we'll get you there, don't worry. What's your name?"

"Jeremy. But everybody just calls me Jer."

"Hi, Jer. I'm Mercy, and this is Noah." She nodded toward Noah, who had moved the father's body, laying it down across the front seat. "Where's your mom live?"

"In Dantown."

"Good. That's on our way to Lake Cumberland. We can drop you off." Noah pulled out of the car and straightened.

Jer's chin quivered. "Are we just gonna leave my dad here?"

Mercy drew in a long breath, searching for the right words, but Noah spoke without hesitation. "You've got to do what your dad would want you to do, Jer. He knows you can't do anything more for him, and he wants you to help your mom. We'll send someone back for him when we get to Dantown. Come on, now." He held out his hand.

The boy squared his thin shoulders and slid across the back seat. Mercy saw that he only had tennis shoes on his feet. The summer footwear would offer scant protection against the deep drifts, but before she could say a word, Noah moved forward and handed Mercy his coat. He swung the boy off the edge of the car seat and over his head unto his broad back.

Mercy moved closer. "Thanks," she half whispered, reaching up to wrap the coat around the boy.

"No problem." Noah turned back to the pickup, breaking a path through the drifts of snow. Mercy followed behind. Wind gusts blew icy particles in her face and stung her skin.

Half-blinded, she kept her head down and followed the broad back ahead of her. Each time she glanced up the sight of Noah carrying Jer through the treacherous storm lifted her heart.

They settled Jer in the back seat of the pickup and offered him a snack bar and a can of pop from the supplies they'd pilfered from the house. The tires of the pickup spun against the slick surface of the road as Noah put the truck into gear again. Finally, the wheels broke through the ice to a piece of pavement and got traction. With a jerk, they lurched on their way.

Soon Jer had munched through several snack bars and, wrapped in a blanket, fallen into an exhausted slumber.

"How far to Dantown?" Mercy asked, keeping her voice low.

"A couple of miles. We ought to be there in time for lunch. Poor kid." Noah stole a quick glance at the back seat in the rearview mirror. "Think his parents were divorced?"

"Divorced or separated." Mercy shrugged. "Nothing unusual about that."

"That's where you're wrong. That's where everyone on this planet is wrong." Noah's chin lifted. "A healthy society is based on stable, happy marriages. Where I come from divorce is rare, almost unheard of."

Mercy laughed. "You have a funny way of talking about people sometimes. It almost makes me wonder if you're really from this planet." She leaned closer and lifted an inquiring eyebrow. "I haven't had much luck in getting you to talk about yourself."

The corners of his sensual mouth turned upward in a smile. "Sorry to be a man of mystery." He turned to face her. "I tell you what, when we get to the house on the lake, I'll build a fire in the fireplace, we'll get naked on the rug in front of it, and I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Shh!" Mercy pressed a finger against her lips and half-turned to check that Jer was still sleeping. "Okay, deal."

His grin turned rakish. “Of course, I may be doing my best to distract you from asking questions. Have I mentioned that one of the keys to a good marriage is soul-shaking sex?”

“We’ve got the shaking part down, that’s for sure.” Mercy relaxed in her seat as the miles to Dantown passed with lighthearted banter. Stopping to help Jer had lifted their spirits.

Soon they reached the city limits. The town had a deserted look. The city streets, half buried in snow, were unplowed and the sidewalks showed no signs of any shoveling. Mercy guessed that most people had retreated into their homes to wait out the multiple disasters.

Jer woke up as they slowed down to enter the town and excitedly gave them directions. “There! Turn there. Go straight through that light. Now turn here. It’s three blocks ... there!”

His stubby finger pointed at a one-story white house, half swallowed up by the continuing storm. Noah pulled the pickup as far as he could into a driveway buried by a huge snowdrift and the three of them fought their way together through the snow to the front door.

“Got a key?” Noah yelled over the wind, but Jer simply dodged ahead of him, laid a hand on the front door handle and pushed.

The door opened and the three of them stepped inside. Mercy knew at once that something was wrong. Inside the house, she heard only the distant tick of a clock. A single light burned in the hallway. All the other rooms were dark.

“Mom!” Jer yelled, rushing from doorway to doorway, his voice growing desperate. “Mom, where are you!”

“In here,” Noah called from the kitchen.

Mercy hurried into the kitchen, Jer skidding to a stop behind her. Noah held up a sheet of paper. “It’s a note, from the ambulance crew. Your mom’s been taken to the regional medical center. She has the plague.”

Chapter Ten

Mercy gripped Jer's hand as they marched into the regional medical center, offering the youngster the comfort of her touch. Noah walked at her side, his calm presence providing wordless support.

The medical center was a four-story square of concrete planted in the heart of downtown Dantown. Unlike the rest of the town, the hospital bustled with activity. Noah held up a hand to stop a harried-looking nurse as she rushed by. "Excuse me, but we're looking for this boy's mother."

The nurse jerked her head to the left. "Check at the admitting desk. They should know which room she's in. We've had ten new patients since midnight."

"All plague?" Mercy forced the words through the lump of terror that clogged her throat.

Fear flickered across the nurse's face. She slumped back against a wall, looking tired. "I'm afraid so. Haven't you heard? It's broken out of quarantine. There are cases reported all over Kentucky, Indiana, hell, even Chicago. At the rate it's spreading, half the country will be dead or infected in the next few days." Her head lifted and she stared beyond them, out the glass doors into the storm. "Maybe they're the lucky ones."

“My mom’s going to die, isn’t she?” Jer whispered to Mercy as they continued down the hallway toward the admissions desk. Her heart ached to see the tears threatening to spill out of his big, blue eyes. He was only eight, too young to face such terrors.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, searching for an answer. The death rate from the plague was close to one hundred percent. Jer’s mother was as good as dead, if she wasn’t dead already. How could she say that to this brave little boy marching at her side?

Noah dropped a hand on Jer’s head and ruffled his hair. “Hey, sport, it’s okay. I’ll bet your mom is still alive and that she’s waiting for you. She probably wants to see you more than she wants anything in the world.”

“Really?” Jer’s blue eyes beamed. He skipped ahead of them, up to the admissions desk. “Hi, I’m looking for my mom, Mrs. Anderson.”

“The ambulance brought her in,” Mercy added.

“The ambulance brought a lot of people in tonight,” the woman at the desk snapped. Dark shadows lay under her eyes, and her face wore a grim look. She consulted the computer screen in front of her. “She’s on the third floor in the infectious diseases ward, but you don’t want to go see her.”

“Yes, I do!” Jer shouted.

“She’s got the plague,” the woman explained to Mercy and Noah, ignoring the boy. “She’s contagious. Although, God help us, we’ve probably all been exposed by now. We don’t have any of those fancy biohazard suits around here. If you go up there, you’ll be right in the same room with a deadly virus. Think about this little boy. Maybe there’s still a chance he’ll survive. You don’t want to put him at any more risk than necessary, do you?”

Mercy rubbed a hand over her eyes, trying to unscramble her exhausted brain. “I guess not. Jer, you’ve got to understand, your mom is very ill.”

Noah dropped to his knees in front of the boy. He put his hands on Jer’s thin shoulders and smiled. “Hey, kiddo, you and me, we’re not afraid of a nasty old germ or two, are we?”

Jer shook his head, his eyes wide. “No! I want to see my mom.”

Mercy fought a sudden urge to kick Noah, right in his sexy behind. What on earth was he thinking? Just by entering the hospital, their risk of contracting the deadly disease skyrocketed. Coming here had been a stupid thing to do, but they were both exhausted and had reacted to the desperate need in Jer’s eyes. Besides, she’d promised to take responsibility for the boy and that meant tracking down his mother.

However, Mrs. Anderson was in no condition to help her son. They needed to get out of here quick before they caught the disease themselves. The admissions clerk was right. Taking the boy up to see his dying mother would be an act of stupidity. “It’s too dangerous,” she hissed.

Noah looked up at her, his obsidian eyes glittering with determination. He rose to his feet and smiled down at the boy. “Wait here for a few seconds, Jer.”

Grabbing Mercy’s arm, he pulled her into one corner.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” she snapped before he could open his mouth. “This is just a small-town hospital. They haven’t set up any quarantine procedures. We’ll be infected if we go up there. How is that taking care of Jer?”

Noah took her hand and squeezed her fingers. Mercy drew in a surprised breath, feeling his strength flow into her. His dark gaze radiated reassurance. “I know this is scary, standing in a hospital where people have the plague. You told me earlier in another situation that we had to do the right thing. You said that it was worth taking a risk to save even one person. The same argument applies here.”

“It does?”

“Yes, it does. I can save his mother.”

“Save her. How?”

“I can heal her.”

Mercy gaped at him in amazement. This was insane. She wanted to pull her hand free from his grip and turn and run, but somehow she could not move. A vision of their bodies wrapped together flashed through her mind, a memory of the scorching passion that had bound them into one.

A wave of fear crashed through her, threatening to suffocate her. Who was this man? What had he done to her? It was just sex, for god's sake. Yet her hand stayed in his and as she gazed up into his smothering black eyes, her fears began to subside.

Ignoring her reaction, Noah kept talking. "Imagine how Jer feels. He's lost his father. He's terrified he's going to lose his mother. We can't drag him out of this place without seeing her. It would break his heart."

Mercy's stomach churned with her inner distress. "I know it sounds cruel, but it's better than letting him catch the plague."

Noah gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "You asked me to trust you and take a risk when we stopped to help Jer. Now I'm asking you to trust me and take another risk. Believe me when I say it will be okay."

Torn between hope and despair, Mercy stared into his somber face. His eyes bored into hers, begging her to believe him. "How can you possibly know that?"

"I told you, I can heal her."

"You have healing abilities?" Her voice rose a notch. "Intuition and healing abilities?"

Noah straightened his shoulders. "You laughed when I told you the weather was going to change, that we'd get snow in June." He jerked his chin at a window. "Care to take a look outside? You wanted to know more about me. I'm telling you more. I can heal Jer's mother."

Mercy fought down her inner panic. How could she believe that? She'd thought he was a scientist, but he was talking like some new-age believer.

Noah's gaze narrowed. "Aren't you the one who told me it was worth taking a risk to save one person?"

“Yes, but I meant a reasonable risk. This plague is certain death!”

“Isn’t Jer’s mother worth saving?”

“Of course.” Mercy glanced desperately at the admitting clerk who was listening to their conversation with a bewildered look, hoping she’d interfere. But the clerk avoided her gaze. “I’d love to save Jer’s mother, but there’s no way we can do it.”

“There’s no way you can do it,” Noah corrected her, straightening. “Trust me. That’s all I ask.” Smiling, he turned and began walking back to Jer. As the boy looked up, his gaze eager, Noah held out a hand. “Come on, partner. Let’s go see your mom.”

Mercy hesitated as she watched the two of them stroll off toward the elevators. Noah moved with his usual fluid grace, his broad shoulders almost hiding the elevator door. He was leaving her. Not because he wanted to. Because she was afraid. Since when had she become too afraid to help someone in need?

Suddenly, her indecision vanished.

“Noah!”

He turned at her shout, his face wearing a huge smile. Her heart leaping, Mercy hurried after them. Whatever happened, she wanted to be a part of it, to stay by Noah’s side. He might be a little bit crazy, but so was she. He was only doing what she had done earlier. He wanted to help preserve their humanity in the midst of this terrible tragedy.

* * * * *

As the elevator rose upward, Noah slipped his free arm around Mercy’s shoulders and squeezed. “Everything will be okay.”

He felt her shudder, but she turned her face upward with a brave smile and planted a kiss on his cheek. The brush of her soft lips against his skin momentarily drove all thoughts of his mission from his mind. When he’d come to Earth, he’d never dreamed he’d find someone like her. His cock twitched. It was a good thing Jer was in the elevator with them,

or he'd be tempted to press the stop button, push her up against the wall and take her. Sighing, he gave his head a little shake. He had to stay focused.

"I think this is foolish, but it's also very brave of you," she whispered in his ear.

His heart swelled with pride at the courage in her voice. He searched her face, and his spirits leapt to see the faith shining in her eyes. She'd seemed so light, almost weightless, when he'd lifted her in the midst of the storm. He wanted nothing more than to take her away from every possible danger, to keep her close to him, to keep her safe. She was the brave one. It required no courage for him to face the plague. He was immune. Her courage proved there was hope for the human race after all. It was only a matter of convincing Mom E to give them another chance.

That was the hard part. This was the third time she'd taken a chance. When he looked at her with his psychic senses, he saw her noble intentions shining around her like a glorious rainbow of light. Surely Mom E had noticed by now. He had to get back to the base as soon as possible. He had to get in touch with the Shaloti and find out what their telepathic communication with Mom E had revealed. They would know if she had forgiven the human race yet.

He tightened his arm around Mercy, pulling her closer, and bent his head to inhale the sweet scent of her hair. She turned her face up, and he planted a hungry kiss on her lips. She responded at once, molding her body to his.

Passion surged through him as he tasted the sweet honey of her mouth. Breaking free, he forced his mind back to his duty. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. I'm not going to let anything terrible happen to us. We've got a date in front of the fireplace, remember?"

Her green eyes went wide, and she sucked in her breath in a little gasp. "How can I forget?"

His heartbeat quickened as he pictured her, naked on the thick rug in front of the flames, her body glowing in the firelight, her tawny hair awash with gold.

The elevator doors opened with a soft whoosh of sound, destroying the momentary vision. He tore his gaze from Mercy to smile down at Jer. "Time to go find your mom, sport."

Still holding the boy's hand, he led the way out into the corridor. The air smelled different here, rancid with the foul odor of disease. He could hear people coughing and the low, guttural moans of someone in pain.

They began walking down the corridor, glancing into rooms where people lay alone and unattended, dying. Where were the medical personnel? The third room down held a young, frightened-looking woman, her pale blonde hair plastered to her head by sweat, her body doubled over with a hacking cough.

"Mom!" Jer burst into the room in a whirlwind of arms and legs and hurled his small body at his mother. "Mom! I found you!"

"Jer!" The mother automatically hugged the boy close, but she raised stricken eyes to the other two strangers. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm Noah McKnight, Mrs. Anderson." Noah introduced himself. Walking up to the bed, he took the woman's hand in his. Her flesh burned and her sunken cheeks were flushed with fever. "I'm afraid we've got bad news. We found Jer in a car wreck on our way to Dantown. His dad was in the car with him, dead."

"Daddy's dead!" Jer wailed, emerging from his mother's embrace. "He died and these people brought me here, and now you're dying, too."

"We're going to help your mom, Jer." Noah spoke with confidence and fixed his gaze on the woman in the bed. Her damp hair clung to her head, and he could see a pulse beating far too rapidly in her temple. "What's your first name, by the way?"

"Laura." Laura Anderson collapsed back against her pillows, her face pale. Jer backed away from the bed, watching her struggle to breathe with growing alarm on his young face.

Laura coughed and pointed at Jer. "The best thing you can do for me is to get my son out of this hospital, fast, before he catches the plague, too."

Jer folded his arms and screwed up his face in defiance. “No, I won’t leave.”

“It’s okay.” Noah squeezed Laura’s hand in reassurance and smiled at her son. “You won’t have to.”

“Maybe you should listen to her,” Mercy said from the doorway. She stood poised, ready to bolt, the bright light that surrounded her darkened by a tinge of fear. She held out her hand toward Jer. “Your mother’s right, Jer.” She switched her gaze to Noah. “We’re not helping either of them by exposing Jer to the plague. We can take him with us to Lake Cumberland. This storm will have to stop someday and when it does, we can head south, someplace warm.”

“That’s a good plan.” Noah turned his attention back to Laura. “But first we have to get you feeling well enough to travel.” Keeping his voice calm and soothing, he bent over her and placed one hand on her sweat-damp forehead. The other hand fingered the silver pendant that hung around his neck. The ruby stone that marked the eye in the center of the engraved pyramid began to glow a fiery red.

“What the --!” From across the room, Mercy gaped at the stone. Her eyes widened.

He turned to her and smiled. “I need your help, Mercy. What I’m about to do takes a great deal of energy. Will you hold my hand?”

He saw her fight her fear as she stared at the plague-stricken woman. The light around her wavered, then brightened to a newer, stronger intensity. She lifted her head and stepped into the room.

Noah’s heart swelled with pride. By God, she was magnificent. He wanted to sweep her into his arms, to cover her sweet face with kisses, but there was no time for that. Laura was dying. He took her hand and nodded at the boy. “You hold Jer’s hand. We’ll form a human chain of energy.”

Mercy's eyes filled with questions, but she did as he asked. Noah rocked back and forth, his right hand still planted on Laura's forehead. He closed his eyes, shutting out Mercy's anxious face. He needed to concentrate, to reach deep within, as the Shaloti had taught him.

A low hum began to come from the stone, rising quickly in pitch. He opened his eyes again in time to see a beam of crimson light shoot out and bathe Laura in a scarlet glow.

"Noah, what are you doing?" Mercy cried, even as the light flickered and went out.

He removed his hand from Laura's head and searched her face, noting the rush of returning color. Only then did he turn his attention back to Mercy. "I healed her."

Mercy gaped at him with astonishment. "With that light?"

A sudden weariness swept over him. Healing always drained his energy down to the last dregs. The questions in her eyes reminded him that he'd promised her some answers. "I told you I'd explain everything later, in front of the fireplace when we're --"

"Yeah, yeah, I remember." Mercy put a finger to her lips and cast a warning glance at Jer.

"Good, because that's the deal." Noah fought off his weariness and turned to Laura. "How are you feeling?"

A look of amazement had appeared on her face. She took a deep breath, then another, her hand pressed to her chest. "Fine. I-I feel fine. The pain inside is gone, and the fever, that's gone, too. I can tell. What did you do?"

"It's, ah, an experimental healing technology, and you're one of the first to benefit from it. You'll be fine now. But I'd advise you to take Jer and get out of this hospital."

"Yes, of course." Laura still looked stunned. She threw off her covers and stood up. "I'll get dressed."

"You can come with us to Lake Cumberland," Mercy volunteered.

Noah gave her a sharp glance, but she ignored it. "We're going to ride out the storm and the plague there," she added.

To his relief, Laura shook her head. “No thanks. I have a place to go. My parents live a few miles from here, up in the hills, on a farm. They’ve got livestock and a basement full of canned food.”

Turning toward Noah, she beamed her gratitude and reached out a hand. “I owe you my life. You’re welcome to join us there if you want.”

Pleased by her impromptu offer, he gave her a small, formal bow. “I’d love to, but I’m afraid I have to get back to base, er, I mean Lake Cumberland.”

“We can take you to the farm, though,” Mercy added, volunteering him again.

He shot a second glare her way. Hadn’t they done enough rescuing for one day? The woman seemed determined to save the entire world.

The thought made him chuckle inwardly. Why should he object to that? Saving the world was his primary mission.

Falling for the woman he’d selected to help him was an unexpected secondary benefit.

Now if he could only be sure that they’d succeeded and made a difference with her courageous acts. He wouldn’t know that until they reached the base. How would she react when he told her the truth about who he was and where he was from?

“We’ve got a pickup truck,” Mercy was saying. “We can take whatever you need from your house with us.”

Laura shook her head and held her arms open to Jer, who came to her without hesitation and snuggled close. “You’ve done enough. If you can get me back home, I can take it from there. I have a snowmobile in the garage. The perfect thing for this kind of weather.” Then her smile vanished. “It belonged to Jer’s dad. We just split up a few weeks ago.” Her eyes teared up and she swayed with sudden sorrow. “Is he really gone?”

“I’m afraid so.” Murmuring words of comfort, Mercy moved next to the woman and took her hand. Within a few minutes she’d helped Laura into the bathroom and gotten her dressed. The woman was still weak from her ordeal, but Noah was relieved to see that

otherwise she seemed perfectly healthy. He expected the techniques the Shaloti had taught him to work, of course. However, this had been the first time he'd ever tried them in the field against such a terrible disease.

As the four of them started back down the corridor, past rooms filled with the sick and dying, Mercy gripped Noah's arm and nodded at the pendant. "Can't you help anyone else?"

A pang of sorrow passed through him. He touched the smooth silver metal and shook his head. "I've healed her, and I've also healed you two because you were exposed and infected, too. But that's all I can do today. I've drained the, uh, power. By tomorrow, most of these people will be dead. We've saved the one we could." He smiled at her, his heart heavy with the weight of all he'd left undone.

He watched as Mercy's chin came up. Tears shone in her eyes as she gazed up at him in sympathy. "I understand. You can only do so much. Don't worry. You've done something. You've struck back at death."

He nodded. "And so have you. You saved Jer."

She pulled him to a momentary halt, threw her arms around his neck and pressed a soft, warm kiss on his lips. Her tongue slid into his mouth, hot and moist. He drew in a sharp breath as his body instantly responded to her touch. He clutched her close, breathing in the sweet perfume of her skin.

"We've saved two lives. We did it together," she whispered in his ear, her voice husky with erotic promise. "I didn't know whether to trust you or not, but now I know I can trust you through anything."

Her tongue came out and licked the outer rim of his earlobe. A hot jolt of passion surged down his spine, hardening his cock. He almost staggered as she broke away, laughter in her eyes. She glanced downward, and he knew she was taking in his erection. He prayed Laura and Jer wouldn't notice his raging hard on.

His lips moved to form two silent words. *Kentucky. Fireplace.*

Mercy grinned and reached out for him again. Their arms linked, they walked out of the hospital and back into the storm.

Chapter Eleven

“There it is.” Noah braked the pickup to a stop in front of the darkened house. “Looks like it hasn’t been disturbed by refugees. No one knows it’s back here except for a few locals.” He paused and offered her a wry smile. “And it’s hard to get to.”

“You’re a great driver.” Mercy rubbed away the condensation on her window to get a better view of the house. The whole journey had been harrowing, but the last two miles especially so. Noah had turned off onto a little-used side road that wound up and down the hillside around the vast lake. Snow drifts clogged the road and at every turn a skid could have sent them plunging into the freezing water. Noah had somehow urged the pickup on, its reliable diesel engine chugging over the noise of the wind, its four-wheel-drive tires finding somewhere to grip on every corner. The last few feet to the house had involved going up a hill, following a road that was now invisible under the snow, but somehow Noah had made it.

A thick blanket of snow covered the house, too. In the fading light Mercy could see it had been built to look like a log cabin, although it was two stories high and three times the size of any log cabin she’d ever imagined. A wide front porch beckoned them inside, and big windows on the south side looked out at the frozen vista of the lake.

“It’s huge,” she said. “I was picturing a tiny little retreat.”

“We use it as a home away from home, and I’ve got a large family.” Noah grinned. “There are four bedrooms. The part you’ll appreciate the most tonight is that it has its own generator, in the shed. In fact, why don’t you stay here in the pickup while I go fire it up.”

A howl of wind as he opened his door reminded her of the freezing temperatures outside the cozy interior of the truck. She watched him break a path through the crusted snow to the shed and thought how lucky she was. On the final leg of the trip, they’d listened with growing horror to radio reports of the world falling apart around them. The quarantine had failed, defeated by air travelers who’d spread the disease everywhere before its virulent nature had been known. The manmade plague had now cropped up across the United States and in several foreign countries. The newscasters were calling it a modern-day Black Death. As in the middle ages, humanity stood helpless before its onslaught.

Mercy shivered as she recalled the cynical remark of one expert that perhaps the super volcano eruption in the United States had been a blessing for that country. It had forced people to retreat into isolated pockets for survival and perhaps some of those groups would make it through the multiple disasters. For the rest of the world, the outlook appeared bleak indeed. She whispered a prayer for the safety of Jer and his mom.

A gust of wind shook the truck. What was taking Noah so long? She rolled down her window to yell his name just as a generator coughed and roared to life. In another minute, Noah emerged from the shed. He tramped back to the truck, opened his door and turned off the engine, pulling the keys from the ignition. “We’re in business. Let’s get inside. I’ve got a fire to build.”

His simple words kindled a flame in Mercy’s imagination. Images leapt to life in her mind. *She and Noah naked together in front of the fire, their bodies intertwined as they made love, his cock buried deep inside her, their lips whispering secrets to each other.*

Desire heated her blood, wiping away the weariness of the two bone-chilling days on the road. She couldn't wait to get him naked on that rug. First, though, she needed a bath. She hoped the generator meant hot water, too. She couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed a good soak.

Noah stomped up onto the covered porch, his boots thudding hollowly against the wooden boards, and paused to fiddle with the top of one of the railing posts. When it slid open, he plucked out a key and unlocked the front door.

Inside, he flicked on the lights to reveal a tiled foyer. To the left, two steps led down to a spacious living room dominated by a two-story rock fireplace.

"Wow!" The exclamation sprang to Mercy's lips unbidden as she admired the gorgeous stone work. "What is that?"

"River rock. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"I'll say. The whole place is stunning." A long, low leather couch faced the fireplace and a thick, patterned rug lay in front of it. She licked her lips, her loins tightening in anticipation, as her gaze followed the stones up and up, to the ceiling. She tilted her head back to take in the soaring wood beams. Glancing down again, she saw that one wall was nearly all glass, revealing panoramic views of the lake and surrounding forest. Beyond the living area, light gleamed off polished granite counters in the kitchen.

Noah stamped the snow from his boots and threw his coat over an antler rack standing beside the front door. Mercy followed suit.

"The house feels warm," she said in surprise. "Does the generator work that fast?"

"I just turned the generator on as a backup. The house mostly runs on solar power, but with this storm, that's going to be unreliable. Until the last day or so, though, there's been enough sunlight to at least keep the place warm. And maybe, if we're lucky, we'll have hot water fairly soon."

"Now you're talking." Mercy rubbed her hands together in anticipation.

Noah kicked off his boots and walked in stocking feet through the living room to the kitchen. He pulled open a cabinet door and plucked out a can of soup. "How does a hot bowl of chili with crackers sound?"

"Sounds spicy. I like it." With a sigh of gratitude, Mercy removed her own too-tight boots. She joined Noah in the kitchen where he was spooning the contents of two cans into a pot. She touched his snow-dampened hair. "I like things hot."

"I've noticed that." He pulled her to him, his arms rock hard around her. Prickly stubble scratched her cheeks as his lips settled over her willing mouth. She leaned into the kiss, her arms wrapped around his neck, drinking him in. A hunger more urgent than the need for food arose within her. With a soft moan, she opened her mouth and probed his lips with the tip of her tongue. Even through their clothes, she could feel his cock, pressed against her stomach. It twitched and hardened.

The aroma of chili bubbling to a boil on the stove wafted upward through the air. With a groan, Noah broke off the kiss and turned to stir the soup. He pulled her up against him with his free arm and planted a kiss on the top of her head. "I know I've got a promise to keep. We'd better eat first, though. I think I'm going to need the strength. How about a meal and a hot shower, and then we can get to know each other better." He raised an eyebrow.

She punched him lightly on the arm. "A lot better. You promised to 'fess up about your mysterious past." Moving back a step, she plopped a hand on her hip and struck a seductive pose. "First we get intimate about our lives, and then we get intimate in other places."

"Okay." He waved the spoon at her. "I get the picture. And the chili is ready."

They ate their chili and crackers at the kitchen table, looking out at the deck and the lake. From within the house, the steady snowfall seemed gentle, peaceful, turning the world into a white wonderland.

"When will it stop?" Mercy wondered as she finished her soup.

“The eruption has probably triggered global winter, much like a nuclear war would have done. I expect it’s going to snow off and on for months, although probably it won’t be as bad this far south. The northern tier of states will suffer the worst. The main impact will be on crops all over the world. It might be too cold to raise food in many areas, and with the plague on top of that, the death toll will be too horrible to contemplate.”

A sharp spear of anxiety ripped through Mercy’s belly. She surveyed the cupboards in the kitchen. “Is there enough food here to last for months?”

Noah winked at her. “Don’t worry, I have a plan.”

“Which you’re going to tell me soon, I hope.”

His dark eyes seemed to glow with an inner light. “I keep my promises.”

He stood up and picked up their bowls, setting them in the sink. “I have a few things to tend to here first, though. And you mentioned taking a bath. We seem to have hot water so why don’t you go get in it. I’ll show you where.”

He guided her across the foyer and into a bedroom, his hand resting on her arm with a possessiveness she found strangely exciting. “This is the master bedroom.” He pointed. “And there’s the bathroom. We have a local lady stop by and clean on a regular basis; so I expect it’s in halfway decent shape. I’m going to go put the dishes in the dishwasher.”

“Okay.” Mercy watched him go with a tinge of regret. Should she have invited him to join her in the tub? Or was there only room for one?

Her jaw dropped as she stepped into the bathroom. The sybaritic suite contained a huge Jacuzzi tub and a walk-in shower of floor-to-ceiling glass with dual rainfall showerheads. Toffee-colored tile covered the floors and walls and fluffy white towels on the double sink counter and next to the tub gave the room the look of an exclusive spa.

A slow smile curved her lips as she contemplated the luxurious options. Now this was the way to spend your final days when the end of the world arrived. Did she want a lush shower beneath dual showerheads or a long soak buried up to her neck in hot water?

Tough questions but the thought of sitting in the Jacuzzi won hands down. She turned on the spout and was delighted when a plentiful stream of hot water gushed out. While the tub filled, she stripped off her grungy clothes and brushed her teeth. The counter held a basket filled with brand-new toothbrushes, still enclosed in their packaging, hand and body lotions and fragrant soaps. This place was almost too good to be real, she decided as she dipped a finger into the steaming water, then added a cupful of the scented lavender oil from a bottle that stood beside the tub.

“Ahhh!” With a long sigh of bliss, she sank to her shoulders in the hot water and closed her eyes. The heat soothed the ache in her bones but did nothing for the relentless throbbing between her legs. She wondered how long Noah would be. She wanted him near, wanted him holding her, wanted to feel that cock inside her again. Maybe her questions could wait until after they made love. They’d talk in the luxurious aftermath, and he’d open his heart to her in the soft afterglow of their lovemaking.

Mercy sighed and sank deeper into the tub. She was going to have a lengthy list of questions for him; that was for sure. Like who was he, where was he from, how had he healed Laura, and how did his family afford such an expensive second home?

The click of the bathroom door woke her. With a start, she realized she’d fallen into a doze in the hot tub. Opening her eyes, she saw Noah standing in the center of the bathroom, unbuttoning his shirt. Unexpected joy jolted through her, shocking her back to full wakefulness. They’d been apart for what? Ten minutes, fifteen minutes? She couldn’t deny the surge of gladness that filled her at the sight of him. In just that brief time apart, she’d missed him. Lord help her, she’d caught it bad for this guy.

His eyes smoldered as he surveyed her in the tub. “Sorry to take so long. I had a few things I needed to do. Do you mind if I join you?”

Stream gently wafted up from the water. That was probably the source of the heat that burned on her cheeks. She nodded. “Sure, there’s plenty of room for two.”

Letting her eyelids drift half shut again, she watched him undress through the veil of her lashes. First, his broad shoulders emerged from the prison of his shirt, then he undid his pants and eased them down over slim hips, displaying long, muscled legs. She licked her lips, already anticipating his firm, strong touch. He radiated the same calm confidence that had sustained her through the last few crisis-filled days. All that and sexy too. She counted her lucky stars as she watched him kick away his pants and pull down his briefs. His penis sprang free, already engorged and erect.

She couldn't tear her fascinated gaze away from it as it swung between his legs. Her pussy throbbed with growing need. He wanted her every bit as much as she wanted him.

Water splashed as he climbed into the tub and then he sank down beside her. The water came up to his shoulders and with a quick movement he ducked his head, then threw it back, sending droplets flying from his tangled locks. He reached for a bottle of shampoo at the side of the tub, poured some in his hand and lathered up.

Mercy laughed aloud at the sight of the cloud of white soap surrounding his face. "You look like you just walked in from the middle of the storm."

Noah scooped a handful of suds from his hair and tossed them playfully at her. "How about you? Does your hair need washing?"

"I guess." Holding her nose, she sank beneath the water. When she re-emerged, blinking her eyes clear, Noah was at her side. His hands settled over her head and his fingers worked their way into her thick, tangled locks. As he gently massaged her scalp, lathering up the shampoo, her tense muscles began to unknot. His exploring fingertips sent tingles dancing along her nerve endings. She shivered, rippling the water, as he expertly rubbed her temples and the back of her neck. She marveled at the deftness of his touch, the way he had of completely concentrating on whatever task was at hand. He reminded her of a Zen master, calm, focused, centered.

“Now we’re a matching set of bubble heads.” Noah’s lighthearted comment shattered her train of thought. Two wildly divergent images popped into her mind -- a Zen master and a bubble head -- and the contrast made her laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

Not wanting to reveal her earlier thoughts, she giggled instead and splashed water at him. He splashed back, then turned on the spigot. “Let’s rinse.” They took turns ducking their heads under the running water. Once they’d rinsed away the shampoo, they helped each other with the conditioner. Mercy rubbed the lotion through Noah’s wet, silky locks and his fingers combed her tangled mop. As they worked on each other’s hair, their naked bodies bumped together in the tub, skin sliding seductively over skin, and Mercy’s heartbeat quickened with each touch.

Finally, Noah turned off the spigots again and smiled through the rising steam. His wheat-gold hair, slick and wet, hung almost to his shoulders. He plucked a bath sponge from a basket beside the tub, dabbed it with liquid soap and held it out toward Mercy. His thigh brushed against hers as he moved closer. “May I?” His eyes glowed with the dark smoke of a smoldering fire. His gaze, wandering over the swell of her breasts where they emerged from the water, left no doubt where this inventive foreplay would eventually lead.

She swallowed and nodded.

“Just lean back and close your eyes. Relax.”

She leaned against the back of the tub as he instructed and let her eyelids flutter closed. The sponge touched her neck and then spiraled lower, over her shoulders, rubbing against muscles stiff from hours of sitting in the truck.

Mercy stretched under Noah’s ministrations and arched her back, letting her body float upward in the warm water. Her breasts emerged into view and the sponge immediately swooped lower, spiraling over first one tender globe and then the other.

A soft moan of pleasure escaped her lips. Whatever might happen, they were together. She hoped they could salvage some kind of life from the disaster. At least they could live out their last days in each other's arms, and in comfort.

As Noah's caresses continued, the physical tension of the long drive seeped from her muscles, but another kind of tension replaced it, an inner pressure building out from her core, a passionate hunger for more of the sensations his touch awakened. Her body responded to the stirring of emotions with a rush of blood that flushed her skin and made her breasts ache and swell.

Noah's hand continued its relentless movements, the soft sponge gliding in a sensuous arc down over one breast and up over the other. Her nipples hardened to taut peaks, and her legs parted in an unspoken invitation. She opened her eyes and caught his knowing smile. He was waiting for her to respond, she knew, waiting for her to initiate the start of this marvelous night when he'd promised to reveal himself to her. On this one night, at least, they would shut out the world and its horrors and concentrate only on each other. She wanted that, wanted it more than she'd ever wanted anything before.

She gave him the slightest nod.

Soft, foaming suds tickled her nipples, slid down the curve of her breasts to pool in the hollow between. He dipped the sponge into the tub, sluiced hot water over her body, washing away the soap. Then he bent his head and licked at the drops of moisture beading on the soft swell of flesh that emerged from the water.

The slow, deliberate touch of his tongue sent a wave of heat scorching down every nerve ending clear to her toes. The sponge swept over her navel in maddening spirals and ventured lower, swooping in an exploring arc over her thighs and between her legs.

Desire rose up in her. She half-turned toward him, the sudden motion making her body float upward in the buoyant water, and he grasped her waist, pulling her onto his lap.

His steel-hard thighs cradled her as she settled against his chest. His rigid erection poked into her stomach. He drew her close, kissing her mouth with hot, fervent kisses.

She reached down under the water to grab his cock, her hands slipping over the silky skin, caressing his balls as they rose and fell in the swirling water.

“I’ve been thinking about this all the way from Dantown,” she whispered.

His obsidian gaze glowed. “Thinking about what?”

“Impaling myself on you.” As she spoke, she grabbed his shoulders, leveraging her body up in the water. The hard length of him slid between her parted legs and she reached down to guide him into her.

For a long, frozen instant, she seemed to hang suspended, the tip of his penis inside her, teasing her clitoris, the buoyant water supporting her weight and making it more difficult than she’d expected to move downward on his shaft. Then Noah’s hands went around her waist, and he pulled her down upon him at the same moment that his hips thrust upward.

His cock slid deep inside her, joining them. She shuddered with the pleasure and licked drops of water from his chin. His stubble rasped against her tongue but she reveled in the burning sensation, reveled in the pressure of his cock, which seemed to swell inside her and press against every inch of her interior.

She started to rock upward, but his hands held her hips firm, stilling her.

“Don’t move,” he ordered, his words carrying a compelling strength. “Feel it and enjoy it. The warmth, the water embracing us both, my cock inside you.”

It seemed a strange request to hold still now when every instinct commanded her to move, when she longed to feel the sensation of him sliding in and out of her, but the trust that had grown between them on their incredible journey silenced her doubts. She fought to control her need, commanded her body to stay motionless.

Their gazes locked. His eyes held a hypnotic fascination. She gazed into two pools of infinite darkness that nonetheless filled with light. She saw fire in the depths of those eyes,

fire and the light of stars. Their spirits reached out and touched through that unending gaze, even as their bodies melted into each other. Blessed heat surrounded her after the terrible cold of their journey. The heat of the steamy water and the fiercer heat of his water-slick flesh pressed against hers, and then that most intimate heat of all, the burning shaft that filled her hollow spaces.

The universe narrowed, all other thought, all other sensation vanishing. She knew only him, felt only him. He penetrated and consumed her. She drowned in his eyes, quivered upon the hard length of his cock. Need built up like volcanic pressure inside of her, until she knew she'd erupt at the slightest movement. Beads of sweat popped out on her forehead. The flame between her legs pulsed, sending a burst of scorching heat up her spine.

Without warning, Noah thrust upward. Instantly, her back arched as a tidal wave of orgasm exploded through her. She cried out in helpless ecstasy as he moved again, thrusting hard into her depths. Water splashed and spilled over the edge of the tub as the two of them merged into one, joined in the most intense orgasm of her life.

When the last spasms of pleasure had subsided, Mercy felt Noah withdraw from her. She sank lower in the water, savoring the warmth all around her, and watched through satiated, heavy-lidded eyes as he climbed from the tub and padded across the marble floor. His dripping, naked body made a splendid sight, especially the smooth curve of his butt and the bold outthrust of his still erect penis. Watching him, Mercy felt her temporary languor fade away, replaced by a renewed burst of passion. Would she ever get enough of this man?

As he returned to the tub, carrying two huge white towels in his arms, she stood up in the water. His eyes widened in appreciation as he took in her bare, damp flesh. Mercy shivered and goose bumps rose up on her skin.

"Here." Noah wrapped a towel around her as she stepped from the tub. His hand on the small of her back turned her toward the door. "Come with me. I have something for you."

Her passion mounting, she allowed him to guide her into the bedroom. Already the flesh between her legs throbbed with renewed anticipation. He led her past the plush bed in the master bedroom and on into the living room.

She saw at once that he'd built a fire in the towering fireplace. Pillows from the couch were scattered on the rug in front of it. Flames crackled around thick logs and sent welcome warmth out into the room.

Her heart melted with delight as she gazed up into his shining eyes. "I see you intend to keep your promise," she said in a husky whisper.

Feeling bold, she let her towel slide to her feet and sank onto the comfortable pile of pillows. Stretching out, she ran one hand down the curve of her body and reveled in the waves of toasty warmth. She eyed Noah and half-smiled at the bulge in the white towel wrapped around his waist. "Going to join me?"

With a flick of his wrist, he sent his towel to the floor and stretched out beside her. His warm palm covered her left breast, his thumb toying with her nipple, sending little rivulets of fire coursing down to her core. Her skin had dried in the warmth of the fire, but her pussy, still slick and moist from their earlier lovemaking, grew even wetter as he pressed his hard body to hers.

"I said I had something for you, remember?" He reached up to a side table beside the couch and pulled down a crystal bottle. It looked like a perfume bottle, complete with the squeeze top.

"A gift?" She reached for it but he snatched his hand away.

"No, it's not quite what you think. It's a special oil made where I come from. I'm going to spray it on you. I think you'll enjoy the effect."

Mercy smiled, almost used to his occasional oddness by now. One thing she did know - she could trust him. He'd never hurt her. She brushed her hair back from her neck, thinking he'd aim the spray at the pulse point there.

Instead, he slid his free hand between her legs. “This oil gets sprayed on your clit. Open up for me, please.”

For a brief heartbeat, shyness engulfed her at the thought of so openly exposing her most intimate flesh to his bold gaze. As she stared up at his face, admiring the strong planes and firm, sensual mouth lit by the glow of the fire, her inhibitions melted in a rush of desire. She’d said she wanted openness. Now he was taking her at her word, quite literally.

A slow, voluptuous shudder passed through her body. She leaned back and spread her legs wide, exposing her pussy to his gaze, aware that her flesh down there was already soaked with her own moisture. Her heart beat faster as he bent over her and pressed the bulb at the top of the bottle, sending a spray of fine mist over the damp lips that surrounded her swollen clitoris.

Immediately, a hot stab of lust knifed through her. Her eyes grew wide as she tried to absorb the sensations radiating out from between her legs.

Noah’s lips curved upward. “This mist makes your private parts incredibly sensitive.”

Mercy bit down on her lip to stifle a cry of passion. God, the man wasn’t kidding! The opening between her legs burned as if aflame. Her throat tightened at the thought of what was to come. She already teetered at the edge of orgasm, and he hadn’t even touched her yet.

He gave her a knowing smile. “Yes, I see you understand. The slightest touch, the merest breath of air will arouse you almost beyond endurance.”

Her heart started to hammer against her ribs as he fixed her with a determined stare.

“And now it’s time to initiate you into true pleasure.”

With a quick movement, he positioned himself between her legs, his hands spreading them wider. His fingers played with the soft curls that massed at the juncture of her legs, teasing, stroking, tugging until she gave a sharp cry of longing. Then his head bent and his hot tongue flicked over the pulsating nub of her swollen clitoris. As she moaned and arched upward, he began to lick the dew from the folds of her inner lips.

Mercy strained to hold her body under control, every muscle rigid, as a pleasure that was almost unbearable pain coursed through her. Noah held her down with his hands gripping her thighs while she gasped and bucked and writhed, wanting to escape the touch of that tongue that sent wild, unbearable waves of passion crashing through her, yet also wanting him to thrust it deeper inside her, to sweep her away in a final tide of desire.

His head bent closer until his hot breath scorched her ultra-sensitive flesh. She cried out as his lips encircled her clit, taking it into his mouth, sucking on it. Her body burned like a living torch. Somehow, the flames of the fireplace had jumped the space between them and sent blazing sparks to sizzle against her scorched flesh.

“Mine,” Noah growled with his mouth still embracing her clit, a low, sexy growl that sent waves vibrating deep into her cleft. As shudders of delight wracked her body, he smacked a last kiss upon her pussy and in a swift movement replaced the tip of his tongue with the head of his penis.

She felt the harder pressure through the waves of sensation that threatened to drown her. Firelight danced up the walls and overhead as he thrust deep into her. Her whole body sang now, a single note, a single cry, a longing to absorb the length of him, to shatter into a thousand pieces under the fierce battering of his desire.

The world exploded in shards of dazzling fire-red light. The smell of smoke filled her nostrils as she convulsed. Something was burning. Was it her? Strong arms held her, a rock-hard body shuddered against hers in the throes of its own orgasm.

Mercy collapsed back on the pillows and drew an unsteady breath. Behind her, she could hear the crackle of the flames. She was surprised to see that nothing was on fire. *Except for my body and my mind*, she thought. Her body lay limp on the pillows as if her strength had blown away with the explosion that had racked her.

God, the super volcano was a dud compared to a lovemaking session with Noah.

Chapter Twelve

Her body humming with the ecstatic release of her orgasm, Mercy stretched out on the thick rug. She propped her head on a throw pillow from the couch and admired the play of firelight spilling over Noah's naked flesh. The single ruby set deep within the silver pendant dangling from his neck caught the golden light and glowed with crimson flames.

She reached out and touched it with one finger. "It's time," she whispered. "Time to confess all your secrets. That was our deal."

He stretched out beside her, his arms behind his head, his expression determined. His black eyes bored into hers; shining with the passion they'd just shared. "And I intend to keep it. What do you want to know?"

"Everything! Who are you? I'm falling in love with you, and yet I know nothing about you, really." She bit at her lip, frustrated. "I mean, I know I can trust you with my life. You've proven that. In other ways, though, you're a mystery. You won't talk about your past, and you say the strangest things at times, and, weirdest of all, somehow you used that pendant to heal Laura."

"So I did." He looked down at the piece of jewelry as if seeing it for the first time.

"How?"

He half turned and draped an arm over her, a crooked, charming smile flitting across his lips. "I warn you, you're not going to believe this."

She sighed, already distracted by the weight of his arm across her hip. She fought the urge to rock forward, to rouse his cock from its momentary quiet. "Try me."

"This pendant contains advanced technology. It's an alien device that augments and amplifies the natural psychic healing ability of human beings. It takes my healing energy and makes it a thousand times more powerful. By tapping into its incredible power, I was able to cure a case of virulent plague."

"Alien!" Mercy almost choked. The calm look on his face was disconcerting. It didn't seem to match his words. "Did you say alien?"

"Yes. Aliens provide my people with most of our technology. With this particular device, the initial energy must come from the human body, and the human body can only supply so much each day or its own life energy becomes dangerously drained. That's why I was only able to help Laura and Jer. And, of course, you and me since we were exposed too."

"Okay." Mercy forced a smile, forced herself to keep staring into Noah's dark eyes. He looked perfectly sane. In fact, he looked glorious. A sense of surreal unreality enveloped her. She was naked on a rug with someone straight out of the X-files. And he was giving her a look of utter sincerity. The sensible thing would be to get up and run for it, but a world-ending blizzard outside made it impossible to flee.

She swallowed. Was it possible she'd misunderstood? "I guess my next question is, where did you get this alien device? You look human to me."

He reached out and stroked her hair, his fingers tangling in her mop. "I am human. I think I just proved that fairly well."

"Umm, yes." His bold stare made her tingle again in all the places he'd just ravaged.

“The thing is --” He pushed a stray strand of hair away from her eyes. “-- I wasn’t born on Earth. I was born in another star system, about thirty light years from here. My parents are human, though.”

She frowned. “How can that be?”

“My parents are Earthlings who were abducted by aliens, by a race who call themselves the Shaloti.”

Something inside her snapped. He was talking nonsense. Did he expect her to believe this? She pushed his arm off her hip and sat up, her temper rising. She crossed her arms over her breasts, wishing desperately for some clothes. This was not the kind of conversation you wanted to have while naked. “Oh, come on!”

He sat up, too, and leaned forward. She searched his face, bewildered by the seriousness of his expression. It seemed he believed what he was saying. Her heart started a heavy thumping in her chest as she remembered how he’d predicted the snow. How he’d healed Laura. Was it possible he was telling the truth?

“UFOs are real, Mercy.” He kept his voice low and confidential. The rumble seemed to vibrate through her. “The Earth’s governments know it, have known it for years. Only they have no idea why the aliens keep visiting but never making contact. It’s because the Shaloti knew this day was coming, that Earth was a planet on the road to disaster. Humanity seemed determined to find a way to destroy itself, and Mom E kept growing angrier and angrier.”

“Wait a minute. How could they know that?”

“The Shaloti are telepathic. They can communicate with Mom E. They sensed her growing anger, and they knew without someone to intervene, humanity would certainly be lost.”

Mercy rubbed her temples, feeling her mind stretching to take in this new knowledge. “So they abducted humans?”

“They wanted to get to know our race, to learn about our potential. They wanted to save some of us. So they picked and chose and abducted some of the best. Oh, maybe not the best in the world’s eyes, but the best by their criteria.”

She nodded for him to go on as she struggled to make sense of his words.

“The abductions started after the Second World War, over sixty years ago now. Many of the people taken by the Shaloti were eventually returned, because they weren’t suitable, but they kept some of them and brought them to an Earthlike planet. There they established a colony of sorts. That’s where I was born.”

He paused and a pleading look appeared on his face. He reached out to touch her hand. “Please, there’s nothing to fear. I’m a human just like you, although with some training you haven’t had as well as access to advanced technology.”

I’ll bet. Mercy shivered, remembering how a simple spray combined with his touch had nearly driven her out of her mind with desire. “Are there a lot of you?”

“A couple of thousand. Originally, the Shaloti gathered enough people to make a new start for humanity if that became necessary. However, as they got to know us, they decided there was hope for our race after all. So their purpose changed. They began to train us to come back here and try to save humanity in the event Mom E decided to destroy you.”

A strange squeezing sensation choked the air from her lungs. She found it hard to breathe for a moment. He looked at her with a mixture of compassion and sympathy. “We’ve been watching your world very closely, sensing the end was near, that it was just a matter of time before someone tripped the trigger and destroyed the delicate balance. The plague started it all, of course. It was an act of blatant inhumanity and the last straw as far as Mom E was concerned.”

Her blood ran cold as she remembered their earlier conversations. “She really does want to destroy us.”

He laid a comforting hand over hers. "I know it sounds frightening, but it's not as bad as it sounds. Mom E lost her temper, but the Shaloti have assured us all along that a planetary consciousness is a very evolved being, very forgiving. They knew she would welcome a reason to give all of you a second chance. That's why I'm here. I came to Earth to find that reason."

"I-I don't understand."

His mouth firmed into a hard line before he spoke again. "The situation is grim. I can't deny that. The plague will eventually burn itself out, but not before millions die. Even more have died in the earthquakes and eruptions, not only here but also overseas. The phenomena have been worldwide. But if we can convince Mom E to stop and not do any more damage, eventually your world will recover."

"Convince her? How?"

He started to stroke her hair again, a tender expression on his face. "I came here to search for something. Tell me, do you know the story of Sodom and Gomorrah?"

Mercy frowned. "Sure. From the Bible, right? They were cities that were destroyed by God because of their wickedness."

Noah nodded. "God would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah if even ten righteous men could have been found in them. Unfortunately, those cities didn't have ten good men. There's a kernel of truth in that old story. We knew if we could find even a little spark of promise in humanity, we could convince Mom E to give you a second chance."

"What about you?" Mercy asked, lifting an eyebrow. "Don't you count with Mom E? Haven't these Shaloti taught you how to use advanced abilities?"

"Yes, they have. However, we weren't born and raised on Earth. No, we had to find humans from this planet who would react nobly during this disaster. Only they could prove our case and convince Mom E the human race deserves to survive." He smiled and dropped a light kiss on her forehead. "You're one of them, Mercy. I knew from the moment I first saw

you that you would behave with the interests of others at heart no matter what the circumstances. I chose to keep an eye on you and I was right. Your courage in wanting to save others, even at the risk of your own life, shows that humans deserve another chance.”

Despite the hope contained in his words, her heart sank. She’d given this man her trust, something she’d never done before. But he was only using her. Tears sprang into her eyes. “You were spying on me? I-I was some sort of assignment to you?”

“No!” A stricken look passed over his face. He reached out and drew her close. “Don’t think that, not for a moment. I felt a powerful attraction to you that first night, and since then we’ve been through so much. I’ve fallen in love. With you. With your goodness. With your tender heart and your brave soul.” His incredible grin broke free. “And with your sexy body.”

She forced a smile but her heart wondered if she could believe him, could believe any of this. He seemed to sense her doubts, because he cupped her face in both hands, his voice growing intense.

“I love you. You’re intelligent and courageous and compassionate. While you were dozing in the tub, I gave the Shaloti a complete telepathic report about your acts of bravery on our trip. They forwarded the information I provided to Mom E via telepathic link.”

Mercy shivered despite the warmth of the fire a few feet away. What was Noah saying? That the fate of the world depended on her? “What if Mother Earth refuses to listen to the Shaloti? What if what I’ve done isn’t enough?”

He smiled at that, a picture of masculine confidence. “She’ll listen. Don't worry. It’s not all on your shoulders. We’ve found far more than ten worthy humans. Other operatives besides me have spread out all over the Earth, finding people like you. The Shaloti are positive Mom E will heed their pleas for mercy. Deep in her heart, she wants to spare you. Oh, there’ll be hard times ahead before the weather returns to normal, not to mention

rebuilding after this widespread destruction, but eventually your people will get back on your feet.”

Mercy pressed a hand to her forehead, trying to make sense of her teeming thoughts. “And what will happen then? Will we do the same thing all over again?”

“No, the Shaloti have sent us to make certain that a new civilization is created out of this wreckage. We’ve been raised without the usual human hang-ups, and we’re here to show humanity the way to a truly sane society.”

Her heartbeat quickened with new hope. Maybe the nightmare of the past few days would end someday. “Is there such a thing?” She stroked her hand over the muscles of his chest and gazed deep into the dark pools of his eyes, pleading for reassurance. The memory of his earlier declaration of love came rushing back. An unexpected excitement stirred in her soul. What would it be like to create a better world with a man like this at her side?

“I know it’s hard to believe after all the insanity of earthquakes and eruptions, but yes, the aliens understand us, understand our inner demons, and they’ve shown us how to live together in peace and harmony. Earth can have a glorious civilization one day. I’m going to dedicate my life to creating it, and I want you by my side, helping me.”

“Me?”

He leaned closer, his warm breath brushing her cheek. “You’re special, Mercy, someone who cares enough about other people to risk her own life. Remember what you told me earlier about saving even just one person if you can? Well, you were right. I had to pretend to hold back to test you, but you came through. And by being willing to risk everything to save one person, you’ve also helped to save a world.”

She lifted her face to his, blinking back tears, and he kissed her cheeks, the tip of her nose, her lips. She closed her eyes and let herself drown in the bliss of his caresses, pushing aside the teeming questions in her mind. Soon enough they returned.

With a sigh, she opened her eyes and pulled away from his embrace. She needed more answers. “What will you do? How will you start?”

He gestured at the living room. “See this house? I think you’ve guessed it’s far more than a vacation house on a lake. It serves as a communications center for our teams around the world. And there’s some very highly advanced equipment in the basement, equipment that can beam both of us up to a mother ship that’s waiting for us in orbit right now.”

She ran a hand over his chest again. He felt solid, real, but she still felt as if she’d stumbled into the middle of some crazy dream. “And what will happen after that?”

“We’ll start to survey the damage to Earth and to humanity. We’ll make a plan for helping people recover and restart their lives. We’ll teach the children what the Shaloti have taught us. And most important of all,” he paused, took a deep breath, “we’ll make a life together. I want to marry you, Mercy.”

This time her heart definitely missed a beat. “Marry me?”

“I told you that where I come from marriage is taken seriously, and it is. Marriage and all the old-fashioned virtues like honesty and caring and compassion and love and courage. Only say you’ll marry me, and we’ll work together to create a better world based on those values.”

Mercy could feel the beating of his heart beneath her outspread palm, a steady, trustworthy beat. His sincerity convinced her beyond any doubt that he was not lying to her, that he intended to make his vision of a new civilization rising from the ashes of the old become real.

Her heart swelled with unexpected joy. She’d found a man to trust at last.

“Aw,” she said, breaking the tension of the moment with a teasing smile, “you just want me for the hot sex.”

There was triumph in Noah's grin as he gathered her close. "You guessed it. Hot sex and a soft heart. I'd call that an unbeatable combination. For now on, it's you and me together. Let's make Mom E proud!"

His mouth lowered to cover hers, reawakening the passion they shared. When she lifted her head again, breathless, something caught her attention. "The wind. It's stopped howling."

"So it has." Noah jumped up and padded barefoot to a window. "Look!" He beckoned her over with a wave of his arm.

Mercy hurried to his side. Chill bumps rose on her flesh as she left the heat of the fireplace behind. Noah wrapped his arms around her, his hot skin burning against hers, his strong embrace providing the warmth and shelter she needed. Smiling, he turned her toward the window. Outside, the storm had stopped. High up the clouds parted and a ray of sunshine broke through.

"Mom E has forgiven us." Pure joy flooded Mercy's heart. They had a second chance.

"Thanks to you." Noah ran a caressing hand over her shoulder. "Will you marry me?"

"I will." Turning in his arms, she stood on tip-toe and sealed their bargain with a long, passionate kiss.

 THE END 

Kassie Burns

As a Libra, Kassie Burns was born to write romances. Romantic and charming, easygoing and sociable, Libras are in love with love.

Her love of writing, though, comes from her fiery Leo moon, which can be creative - and explosive. A stormy early life taught Kassie a lot about love's ups and downs - and provided plenty of material for the steamy romances she loves to write.

Born a small town girl, Kassie moved on to a big Midwestern city where she works as a writer and editor. There she found love and settled down with a husband, her adorable dog and her ever-trusty computer. As an erotica writer, she dates her interest in bondage back to long nights spent chained to that computer.

When Kassie isn't busy writing, she indulges in her favorite hobby: astrology. She's taken classes from several astrologers and keeps busy casting charts for friends and family who want a peek at the future. Her other passionate pastime is golf - all those handsome men striding up to the tee box! But her true fantasy is to someday hit a hole in one.

Kassie's first book for Loose Id is *Disaster Earth* - when the world ends, love begins. You can visit her online at www.kassieburns.com.